

Spero's Flight

Leia's office door chimed. She didn't look up from the stacks of datapads on her consulate office desk — the week's edicts were being forced through the Imperial Senate chamber for votes before the new year's fete week. If she didn't finish reviewing them, who knew what new and tyrannical policies the New Order factions would pass. She'd have to leave for Ralltiir soon, and she couldn't afford to fall behind on her Senate datawork. The door chimed again. "I told you, I'm not to be disturbed," she called.

The door slid aside anyway. One of the consulate's lesser aide's poked her head in. "My apologies for disturbing you, Princess," she said, bowing her head in shame. "Master Gardener Spero insists he must see you. It seems rather urgent."

"Show him in, Maglenna," Leia said, her brow furrowed with concern.

Spero shuffled in, kneading his hands anxiously, his red head tendrils shaking with fright. "Princess, something terrible has happened," he stammered. "I was working in the consular gardens and I found a datacard hidden in the main planter. Well, I knew it shouldn't be there, and I tried to return it to the chief of the household staff. As I was doing so, a strange man approached me, said he was with Imperial Intelligence, and told me I was under arrest."

"How did you get here?" Leia asked.

Spero blushed. "The man was standing next to the bed of Ancathian funge-flowers," he explained. "Fearing that I might be in danger, I whistled the proper

frequency, and the flowers spewed their pollen into a thick cloud around the man. Humans are particularly susceptible to the funge-flower's pollen, and he was momentarily stunned. I slipped out the back garden gate and carefully made my way here. Please, Princess, you must help me."

Leia knew she shouldn't have allowed the Rebel operatives to use the Alderaan consular gardens as a meeting place, and she certainly didn't approve of them using the main planter as a drop point for datacards. Still, the damage was done and Spero was one of the casualties.

"Maglenna?" Leia called. The young aide appeared once again in the office doorway. "Take Spero to the consulate turbolift — the private one adjacent to the conference room. Take him down to sub-level 27 and hand him off to Hindred. He'll know what to do."

"Where am I going?" Spero asked.

"Somewhere safe," Leia assured him, rising from her seat and taking his shaking hand in hers. "Hindred knows a dozen bolt holes, both in system and out. In the meantime, I'll get our operatives fabricating some rumors to throw off Imperial Intelligence. Don't worry, you'll be safe, friend."

Spero bowed low as Maglenna tugged on his cloak. "You shall have my eternal gratitude, Princess," he said. "Should our paths ever cross again, I shall be most indebted to you." The aide urged him out of the office and toward the private conference room turbolift.

Dazzling Fireworks

Somewhere on Corellia...

Kylaena looked upward and saw the amazing display of lights in the sky as revelers launched fireworks in celebration of Empire Day. It was a rather large variety of displays from red to gold to blue and every color in-between. Her eyes traced the streamer of a fresh launch which exploded high in the sky in a vibrant violet ring that looked as if it would extend to the edge of the atmosphere. This was the final day of the celebration that marks the abolishment of the Jedi Council, and the republic, as well as the rise of the Emperor to power; Bringing the new "peace" and order to the galaxy.

Her eyes drifted down with a reminder of the cost, across the river lay a battlefield with countless battered debris. The rebellion, or the Alliance as they like to call themselves have sworn to end the tyranny of this Empire -- stating that they will free us from his oppressive Sith ways. It's all too confusing she thinks as she stares up once again....

Celebration or defeat she still had to make dinner....

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he Briefing of Spacetrooper Platoon 243-XT

(From the personal audio record of Sergeant Clayton Balrog, Spacetrooper Platoon 243-XT.)

"Men, the mission we're about to embark upon is considered highly dangerous by Imperial Command. Nevertheless, it's fallen on our shoulders to accomplish the impossible yet again!"

(Cheers are heard in the background.)

"Watch on the holoprojector as I detail our assignment. Here you see the suspected pirate vessel, *GrimDeath I*, a totally converted Old Republic Victory-class warship. It doesn't have the firepower of an Imperial Star Destroyer, but is impressive regardless. This vessel is responsible for raids throughout the Woldoaa System, and recent observations indicate that the pirates in question may have ties to the Rebellion. Long-range sensors have tracked the ship for three standard days; it is apparently headed for Galpos II and if we wait much longer the pirates will slip through our fingers.

"The original plan was for this Star Destroyer to track the pirates until the *Avenger* and the *Terminator* moved in. Imperial Command no longer feels we can wait. Our platoon will approach the target in our battle shuttle while this Destroyer creates a diversion. Currently it holds a position beyond the target's sensor capabilities, but once we launch and are in transit, the Destroyer will move into the target's extreme sensor range to attract its full attention. It will then cross the pirate vessel's route, still at maximum sensor range, of course. When the target turns to scan the Destroyer, we will coast in using the target's own engine noise as cover. The Destroyer will then begin jamming broadcasts to further hide our approach.

"But then comes the hard part. Imperial Command wants the target intact and at least a few of its command personnel alive for interrogation. We will swing past the main engine and fire concentrated blasts to disable the target's engines. We will also knock out as many weapon emplacements as possible as we move to the forward hull. Here the shuttle will fire a concussion barrage to split the lower hull, providing Strike Force One with quick access into the vessel. Strike Force Two will move into position and create its own entry into the bridge.

"Remember, there are more than 300 pirates aboard. We hope to confuse and injure as many as possible with our first pass, but they will outnumber you five to one! Kill as many as you must, but remember, we need at least five from the bridge alive!

"You have your orders. Are there any questions?"

(A voice is heard from somewhere in the briefing room.)

"Yes, sergeant. What are we doing after lunch?"

Song for a Fallen Nomad

Wenny Boggs had gone farther into the desert than he had planned. He was still stalking the elusive herd of Womp Rats when he realized where he was and how low Tatooine's twin suns were hanging in the sky. It would be safer to camp than to cross kilometers of vacant sand in the dark; Tatooine's night belongs to the Sand People. He certainly didn't want to confront a hunting party made up of those fearsome beings. He turned his landspeeder toward a rise of rocky hills, in search of a defensible spot to wait out the night.

The cranny wasn't roomy or comfortable, but it provided protection. With a blaster rifle at his side and a hunk of SoroSuub Insta-Meat to munch on, Wenny settled in.

Sleep eventually claimed the youth, no matter how much he tried to fight it. The darkness of the desert and the gentle sounds of the night combined to lull Wenny into a light doze. Then the singing started and Wenny woke with a start. The song he heard had been hauntingly sad, but the night was now quiet. Could he have dreamed it?

Again he heard it, the sound echoing from over the jagged peaks at his back. It was a somber, wistful chant that captivated the young farmer. Wenny decided he had to see the singer. Slinging his rifle across his back, he climbed over the rocks to have a look.

Below was a narrow canyon that wound into the tall crags. A single Bantha waited at the canyon's mouth, riderless but equipped with packs and pouches that clearly belonged to a Tusken Raider. No one was in sight, but the song continued, pulling at him, dragging him into the crags. Wenny could offer no resistance.

The corridor of rock emptied into a hollow circle surrounded by high walls of stone. In the center of the circle was a flat stone platform, ringed by stacks of painted rocks, rising as totems to ancient, unknown gods. And there was the singer, bending over a figure that rested on the flat stone. It was a Tusken Raider, one of the fearsome Sand People, and he sang not in the rough, growling voice of his kind, but in a sweet, sad, lilting one, unhampered by the breathing filter his folk always wore.

This Raider had removed his filter, but Wenny could not get a clear look at the creature under the bandages. He was transfixed by the Raider's song, strangely melancholy and dreamy, not harsh and frightening as Wenny would have imagined. But then again, he had never imagined that Sand People would, or even *could*, sing!

The figure on the platform looked old and weak. As Wenny watched, the aged one reached out and grasped the singer's hand. He whispered words into the ear of the youth, then his hand fell away and he died.

For a long moment everything was quiet. The song had stopped as abruptly as the old one's life. The young Raider, wrapped in tattered robes and swaddled cloth, his breathing filter and helmet at his side, rocked back and forth as he stared down at his expired comrade. Then he began to wail, his anguish shattering the night and echoing through the canyon. Somewhere, a million kilometers away, the Bantha's cry joined its master's.

Wenny bowed his head. He never imagined the Sand People — the Tusken Raiders — as feelingful, emotional beings. He wiped his eyes and gave a final nod to the old one, then quietly returned to his nook to await the Tatooine dawn.

Iggjel and the Mother Jungle

I know that it is against the ways of the herd, but I had to help my herd-friend Iggjel. I didn't understand why at the time, and I'm not sure he did, but he needed to see the domain of the Mother Jungle, to walk upon Her pure, untouched ground.

My herd-friend Iggjel belongs to the Wayland Herd, as do I. We are tenders-in-training, who one day will care for the farms aboard our craft. But the lush jungle of the unexplored lands called to Iggjel, and he needed my help to answer that call.

Armed only with a powerstaff and an agri-kit, Iggjel boarded my skimmer and off we went toward the uncharted continent whose coast the herd had been traveling these past weeks. During those days I would look out upon the teeming vegetation and watch as Iggjel listened to its silent call. The Mother Jungle wanted my herd-friend and I could do nothing less than aid him.

Our little craft skimmed the dancing waves, quietly approaching an empty beach. That barren stretch of sand was a gateway, for beyond its sun-drenched shore lay the vast jungles of Ithor's unknown lands. I stopped the skimmer above the water, letting it hover only meters from the pure-white sand. We are taught never

to set foot upon the untouched lands, and I could not bring myself to mar the dunes with so much as a pass of the skimmer's engine.

Iggjel nodded. He understood my hesitation. We had grown up together, dreaming our dreams and planning our plans. But all that was over now. I looked into my herd-friend's eyes and realized that I would never see him again. Still, I felt joy, not sorrow, that fateful day. He touched the curve of my head, in the customary farewell of our people, and gathered his staff and pack. With a final glance at the herd, its enormous bulk filling the horizon, Iggjel was over the side, his feet in the clean virgin sand. This act, no matter what the elders might say, was not an act of defiance. It was love.

Iggjel walked toward the impenetrable green wall of plants and bush and it parted, granting him access to the lands never walked by those of the herds. For a brief moment I thought I could see others deep within the teeming foliage, but then the gate closed and everything was as before.

I had seen the Mother Jungle choose a priest, witnessed the glory of Her call. I wished my herd-friend luck and good travel, then slowly turned my skimmer and returned to the herd.

Wanderer of Worlds

This world feels so dead. Blistered by twin suns, hostile... desolate. I've seen many planets, but none so unforgiving as this one. I wonder how anything can survive here.

I wander the stars without a world to call home. My name is Daushoroc; my partner and good friend is Tamoss. We are traders of gems, artifacts and curiosities. I scour the worlds of the Outer Rim looking for items that may pique the interests of wealthy nobles and corporate leaders. They have a taste for such goods, and I am more than happy to relieve them of their wealth.

This is my first expedition of Tatooine. There seems to be very little on this world of sand. Those who come here often serve the gangster Jabba. I steer clear of him and his minions. No good has ever come of dealing with the Hutt. Tamoss and I have other reasons for being here.

It began with a legend. Forty years ago the courier ship Athallian Messenger crashed somewhere in the wastes. The sand storms soon devoured the ship. Many treasure hunters have since searched for the wreck and its cargo of ancient gemstones. A few returned empty-handed, but most disappeared, no doubt killed by Tusken Raiders or buried by ravenous sand storms. Even the skittish Jawas refuse to search for the Messenger, but they were willing to part with a map and some vague clues in exchange for a few crates of power converters and tools. Tamoss and I are brave enough to search for the gems and foolish enough to discount the dangers.

We are nearing the canyons the Jawas warned me about. I can already sense them in the air. The Sand People must be closing in, hiding in the shadow of the coming night. I am sure they have been aware of our presence for some time. Only now are they willing to force a confrontation. We must be nearing their camps and water sites. We must be cautious.

I tell Tamoss that, if need be, we should be able to outrun them! Tamoss laughs at that suggestion. We've strapped cooling tarps and water packs to our dewback. Without them, this harsh climate would kill us within a day. We have no choice but to make a peace with the Sand People.

We should profit handsomely if we are successful. Thirty or forty thousand credits could be ours. That money would buy many luxuries, but

Tamoss and I have a better use: Our credits will purchase the freedom of some of our fellow Eirraucs. Sadly, my people are slaves of the Empire.

We are easy targets back then. We asked only to be left alone. We were farmers and traders, scientists and students, artists and artisans. Warfare was unknown. We were weak.

Conquered, rounded up and dispersed throughout the galaxy, we were forced to serve Imperial nobles and labor in research facilities and prison camps. Most of us did not know the meaning of the word "resist" until much later.

Tamoss and I have resisted in our own way. We liberated ourselves from the slaving pens, and now use our trading profits to purchase the freedom of our people. We deliver our liberated brothers and sisters to a safe world far from prying eyes of the Empire. It is a slow and dangerous process, but little by little we are succeeding.

The silence of the desert twilight, and my reverie, is broken by a high-pitched wail. Tamoss and I see movement from all sides, and instinctively we prepare to flee. Our hind legs pulse with energy, eager to rear up and launch us into the air. Our mid-legs tremble, ready to pull at the sand and send us running! It is difficult to contain these primitive drives, but we stand our ground and hold our heads high. We cannot show weakness or fear now.

Half a dozen humanoid figures approach. Their faces are obscured by crude breath masks, but their intent is easily understood. They snarl in their crude language, brandishing gaffi sticks above their heads. Tamoss and I keep our handmade blasters at the ready.

Their charge is halted by a single howl. Another Raider arrives; he is small and frail, yet easily pushes past the aggressors. He must be an elder. It is time to make peace: I offer him packets of water and a Tusken battle talisman. He slowly approaches, lowering his gaffi stick. The others begin to hiss and scream, poised to attack. They must think we have more water. I try not to guess what they might do next.

The elder Raider silences the others with a cry, and turns back to me. He claims the water packs and the totem, silently staring at me. He has accepted my presence - for now. Tamoss goes to the dewback to retrieve the small

water vaporator. Once assembled, the device is barely two meters tall, yet it could collect enough water to sustain this entire group.

Now it's time to test this truce. I pull out my datapad and show him an image of the ship I am looking for. The elder slowly points toward the distant mountains. He uses his gaffi stick to sketch in the sand, drawing a profile of the distant mountains and making a pair of circles - the twin suns. He traces an arc twice more. He turns his back to me, silent. Facing me, he draws a fourth arc, then howls and menacingly raises his gaffi stick. The others follow suit, but stop when he lowers his weapon.

Three days to find the wreck and return through this canyon; that will be time enough. Tamoss and I soothe our nervous dewback while the Raiders blend back in the shadows of the canyon. Now, the only sign of their presence is a few marks in the sand.

It's then that I realize how much my people share with these desert scavengers. We only want to be left alone. We will fade back into the shadows if we can, but will fight if we must.

We only wish to survive.

And somehow we will.

Grand Moff Tarkin's Data Journal

Personal Data Journal Entry #572, Tarkin recording

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As we near the final stages of the battle station's construction, I have just received word that the Emperor is sending an old friend to "assist" me. Lord Darth Vader, who I have not seen or worked with since my days in the Emperor's court, is being sent to aid me in the development and testing of the Death Star's mission profile. I have no doubt of his good intentions. I also have no doubt that Vader is coming to serve as the Emperor's eyes as this important project draws to a close.

While part of me is disturbed by this news, another part of me welcomes my old ally. Vader is a powerful force in the New Order, and my contacts in

Imperial City assure me that his own influence and personal power grows with each passing day. With the Dark Lord at my side, the Death Star Project can do nothing but succeed.

Lost Treasure

Long ago in the days of the Old Republic, Mustafar was a lush green world. It was a much different place than it is now, free of volcanic activity and a harsh atmosphere. The Jedi were strong in the ways of the Force, and had many temples on Mustafar where they cultivated their abilities and trained their students. The Sith were also very powerful and wanted to exterminate the Jedi. Long ago, this small world set the stage for a climactic battle between the Jedi and the Sith.

The padawan's eyes widened with amazement! Her master had put a few odd pieces of junk into a glowing blue cube and meditated. A short while later he pulled out a hat. "There you go!" he said, smiling as he handed her the small fuzzy hat.

"It's a lucky hat you know." He winked at her as she took it from him and put it on her head.

Laughing, she replied, "Oh Master Chu-Gon, you've taught me that there is no such thing as luck."

Playing coy with his young Padawan, he stood tall and said, "I taught you that? Why would I teach you such a thing? The universe is full of randomness and nothing is connected."

She was on to his playfulness. Rolling her eyes and bobbing her head back and forth, she went along with her wizened teacher's irony, "Oh yes, the universe is a big silly place all random with no meaning..."

They laughed at their own joke, funny to them but maybe not so funny to anyone else, which made it special.

"Master, how did you do that?" Serious again, the young Padawan wanted to know how he had transmogrified the little bits of junk into a fuzzy blue hat. "Please tell me!"

"Alright little one, it's time for your next lesson."

They sat down in the temple. The temple was a carved stone gazebo with ancient writings and glyphs carved into it.

"As we have already discussed, the Force is what gives a Jedi his power...or her power."

"It is an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together. Even now it flows through you, through me. The Cube. The Temple. Everywhere!"

"It is our ally." The young Padawan said with a deep knowing of what she had just learned.

"Yes, little one. It is our ally."

Smirking, she looked up at Chu-Gon, "But that doesn't explain how you made the hat!"

Smirking in return, the Master Jedi chuckled, "No, that doesn't explain how I made the hat."

He continued, "The Force is created by all living things, but it flows through *everything*. It even flows through inanimate objects. The cube is a lens. It helps focus the flow of the Force as it passes through the cube and also the items placed within it."

"By meditating and channeling the Force through the cube, it is possible to manipulate the inanimate objects inside, merging them to create something entirely new. Over the years, I have studied Force and how the things on this planet are amplified by the energy emanating from its core. Mustafar is a unique world with many secrets."

Suddenly, an alarm sounded and drew their attention away from the lesson. Chu-Gon was visibly upset and almost as the alarm sounded, a disturbance in the Force rippled through them so great, that the young Padawan began to cry.

"Stay here for a moment Padawan. Let me find out what has happened."

Chu-Gon hurried to another part of the temple to make contact with his fellow Jedi. She waited while he investigated the disturbance. She waited some more and inside she knew something was wrong.

"Master? Master, where are you?" She hurried to the main building on the temple grounds where he should have been.

He wasn't there. She searched all over the temple. Surely he wouldn't leave her alone.

Something had happened to Master Chu-Gon. He had...vanished!

"Yes, that's right. Doctor Ithes Olok. The foremost researcher whenever Jedi and Force related objects are involved."

"Oh...uh, THE famous Doctor Ithes Olok, right." The young green Twilek quickly agreed to Doctor Olok's exaggerated notoriety.

"Right. Now I'm sure you've heard of the Legend of Chu-Gon Dar, correct?" The good doctor sounded as if it were incredulous that anyone wouldn't have heard of the legend by now.

"Refresh my memory." Attractive young Twilek women are very skilled at inspiring men to ramble on about the things they probably shouldn't be talking about.

"Chu-Gon Dar was a Jedi Master that lived thousands of years ago during the era of the Old Republic. He resided at the Jedi Temple here on Mustafar and his knowledge and understanding of the Physical Force was unmatched by any other."

She subtly writhed and looked at him wistfully. He eagerly continued, "Well, you see, the legend goes on to say that using his vast understanding, he created a device. A device designed to channel and manipulate the Physical Force.

The details are a little fuzzy there, but from what I can tell, it was meant to alter the physical properties of the items placed inside of it. Apparently, this produced some interesting results."

She almost cooed, "Interesting results?" The good Doctor had gone on rambling as he regaled her of Cube's history.

"The device is said to have worked off of the principle that the Force flows through all things, both animate and inanimate. If the proper items are placed

in the device, and the Physical Force is altered in a certain way, it is theoretically possible to merge those items into something entirely new!"

"What does any of this have to do with your research?"

"Ah yes, the exciting part. After the fall of the Old Republic, the Jedi Temple was abandoned. Eventually it collapsed due to the violent nature of this planet. The device and its secret were lost."

"Yes, and?" She almost had what she was looking for.

"And...a recent excavation of the Jedi Temple ruins revealed a hidden underground storage chamber. It was filled with hundreds of these small cubes you see here. I believe that these cubes are duplicates of the device Chu-Gon Dar created so many years ago."

"Really? Do they work?" She asked him, hoping for a clue about how to work the little wonders. Visions of treasures danced in her head.

"To be honest, I don't know."

She was crestfallen as he spoke the words.

"These cubes do radiate strongly with the power of the Physical Force, and they do seem hollow inside. I just can't seem to get any of them open. However..."

"However what?"

We did find some ancient scrolls in the temple ruins along with the cubes. I think they may provide the information we need, but there are a couple hundred symbols used that I don't quite understand. I need to know more about these symbols in order to read the scrolls."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Actually, there is. I've seen symbols like these before while surveying some of the Old Republic ruins to the south of this facility. I didn't think much about it at the time, but I believe if I could get some notes about the symbols there, we might understand more about this scroll."

She volunteered, "What do you need me to do?"

Doctor Olok went on about the scrolls and the ruins, giving her a simple job. He babbled on about this and that, never once noticing her take the scroll and a little notebook of his.

She gave him a peck on the cheek and scampered out of the room. Once she had made it around the corner and down the hall, she met up with her mysterious partner.

"Did he buy it?"

"I think so. He told me where the ruins are. Now all we have to do is get there and get a scan of those symbols. Hopefully we can pay someone to make some sense of them. If we do, we'll be rich. I heard a story about a smuggler that laid his hands on one of these cubes and somehow figured it out how it works...

Sickness Of The Storm Lord

Strolling into the Mos Eisley cantina, she remembered how strange it looked kissing Dr. Olok and watching a Mon Calamari swoon while she stole his notebook. Flirtations had always been profitable for Aemele but this was turning out to be a huge prospect for her. If she and her partner could find someone that could understand Dr. Olok's notes, they could easily pick up just the right items for the cube and they would be able to make a fortune from Jedi magic!

If everything went well, she'd meet her partner in the corner of the cantina, and he would tell her that he'd talked to his contact, the notes were deciphered, and all they would have to do was plunk some items into the cube and be rich. Figrin Da'n and the Modal Nodes filled the room with music to a happy crowd, but her heart sunk as she reached the booth that was supposed to be their rendezvous point. Her partner was nowhere to be found.

A hard boiled mercenary sat where her partner should have been. Whoever this was, he certainly wasn't the law. Something was definitely wrong, but like the Twi'lek proverb says, "one cannot defeat a heat storm, one must ride it."

"Glad you decided to join me."

"Where's Cap?"

The stranger sneered at Aemele. The questions they were asking each other were almost predestined. A thousand times, this drama has played out. Smugglers, thieves, and mercenaries ready to close their deals and cash in on big rewards only to end up face to face with a stranger bearing with very bad news at the finish line when it is least expected.

"He's on the wrong side of an airlock. How about you give me the cube and Dr. Olok's notes instead, and then you and I can just avoid the messy part?"

Slowly reaching for her blaster, she started to tell the pirate that she didn't have the cube. By the time she was able to deny knowing who Dr. Olok was, she could surely end this discussion, pay the bartender, and get out of town before the Imperials showed up to investigate.

"Don't even try it sweetheart. My blaster is already aimed at your pretty little belly. You're late to the party, and even if you got in a lucky shot, my buddy, who is conveniently standing right behind you, would shoot you first. There's no way out of this." Begrudgingly, she passed her coveted satchel to the double crossing pirate. "Now just sit there, have a drink, enjoy the Nodes, and start thinking about your next heist. Forget this one. This ends here, or it'll be the last job you ever do. Got me?"

As frustration and anger filled the empty spot where her dreams of riches once lived, she nodded silently and raised a hand to the bartender for a drink.

Shortly after "acquiring" Dr. Olok's notebook and a Chu-Gon Dar cube, the veteran commando traveled to Coronet for his own rendezvous. An old friend was waiting at the starport to meet him.

"Hey old buddy, how'd it go?"

"No problems at all. I have Dr. Olok's notes she swiped and the cube she had. She fell for the tough guy routine. Where'd you stash her

partner?"

"He's going to have a nasty headache when he wakes up. Once he shakes that off, it might be a while before he gets off Kashyyyk though."

"Kashyyyk?? You took him that far out? How come?"

Relan smiled a crooked smile, "For fun! When he wakes up, he's going to find himself on the wrong side of an Imperial Blockade and at the bottom of the Myyydril caverns."

"The Myyydril Caverns?!? How'd you manage that?"

"Chief Kallaarac owed me a favor."

Holding up the leather satchel, they laughed out loud leaving everyone around them wondering what was so funny. "Well, we've got to be going. Dr. Olok is anxious to get his notes back."

"You're not making me go all the way to Mustafar to give some professor his notes back? What's going on?"

"Yeah, we're not going back just to return a notebook. The rest of the crew is waiting for us on Mustafar. The team is there for a mission. The council says there is some kind of Force shard or something we should be looking for."

"Force shard?"

"Yeah, I don't know much about it; just that they were able to decipher some of the temple writings from the Doctor's notes. Something about an ancient Jedi battle with the Sith and some sort of shard from a Force crystal. C'mon, I'll fill you in on the rest of what I know along the way."

"Skip it. Let me know when we get there. I'm going to sleep through the trip." The trip to Mustafar was all too familiar. Between the Imperial blockades and the harsh atmosphere, travel was restricted so they were doomed to uncomfortable seats and bad food on an "approved shuttle service."

After returning Dr. Olok's notebook, the rebel force gathered in the front room of the Mensix Mining facility. A late night and unusually quiet moment set the stage for a quick mission briefing.

Working together with a group of underground Jedi, they would search the angry planet of Mustafar in the hopes of uncovering secrets forgotten long before the fall of the Republic. Talking to each other in an informal code, they made their plans under the guise of a common survey mission.

"The...ah work details are laid out. We need to find all the "markers" and bring back the data as quickly as we can. Time is of the essence. If you have any questions, the team leaders have all the details. We'll meet back here once we find what we're looking for." Splitting up, the rough and tumble rebel group left in different directions.

Relan and the commando headed towards their first mission point out through the back of the facility, passing two Mustafarian miners who were joking around with each other to pass the time.

"Back together again, eh? What did I do to get stuck with you?"

"Just lucky I guess. I'll drive, just hop in the skiff. Be sure to suit up; we're headed towards Berken's Flow. We'll be crossing some lava so you'll want to stay protected in case I decide...er...slip and dump you in."

"So what's the real mission? I'm sure we're not going on a survey mission."

"Yeah. With all the recent activity on the planet, we've discovered some old legend about a Jedi Master. Two actually: Chu-Gon Dar and Erg Krow. Their names were discovered on a tablet that depicted the history of the Sith Wars. It took some time to decipher the old language, but the Jedi I mentioned were involved in a final attack against the Sith."

"The Sith Wars? I thought those were just legends?"

"No. The Sith Wars happened a very long time ago. The Jedi used to have an entire complex of temples on this planet, and the Sith ruthlessly attacked them with a big battle fleet. From what we've been able to tell, they had the strength to wipe out everyone here. These two Jedi were part of a defense force that used some sort of shard from a Force crystal to repel the attack. We're heading out to find that crystal, any information we can find about those Jedi masters, or anything that might tell us what happened in the Sith attack. If we're lucky, we'll find some kind of lore about what that crystal was or how it worked."

"That sounds pretty boring. What are we doing, just searching the old ruins?"

"Partly. We've got a lead to follow. It seems some reporters for the Corellian Times have gotten themselves into some trouble out by Berken's Flow."

"Trouble? What kind of trouble? How does it tie in?"

"The only thing we know is that they went out there to do a report on some old archeological dig, and they never came back. We have to go find out what happened to them. If they don't have any information, we go to the ruins ourselves."

"I see a couple of Bothans up ahead. One of them is down. That must be them."

The Transformation of Dr. Namdaot

A Bothan woman stood alarmed and distressed frantically making claims as they approached her.

"Please don't tell me that you are on your way to join up with the Dr. Namdaot...well, I suppose he calls himself the Storm Lord now."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

"Whew! Finally, someone with some sense. You shouldn't travel any further up this road. That madman and his followers have almost

completely taken over the valley. The only people they even tolerate are this group of scavengers who pay homage to the Storm Lord."

"Who or what is this Storm Lord you keep mentioning?"

"I'm sorry. I completely forgot my manners. I am Jural, a reporter for the Corellian Times...perhaps you have read my column on galactic exploration? No? Anyway, I was out here reporting on Dr. Namdaot's excavation of the temple ruins up the way."

"There are temple ruins up there?"

"Yes, a very large complex of them. Dr. Namdaot was uncovering some amazing finds. It would seem that those ruins were once the main temple on Mustafar. He was on the trail of something big when the change occurred. He said that he had found evidence that a powerful Jedi artifact was once housed in the temple and that it might have something to do with why Mustafar is like it is today."

"You said a change occurred? What kind of change?"

"It was subtle at first, barely noticeable. Sometimes you would get the feeling someone was watching you even if you were all by yourself. Other times you would hear...well, I could swear they were voices, but they were too low to understand. Everyone was feeling it, Dr. Namdaot the worst of all..."

"Go on."

"Dr. Namdaot started to talk back to the voices. At first, when we would ask him about it, he would just chuckle and say that it was nothing. But after a while, we would catch him having conversations with nothing. When we asked him about those, he would get very angry and tell us to mind our own business. Then one day, he just walked out of the base camp and went to the summit of the temple ruins."

"Sounds like the good doctor snapped."

"Some of us thought that too. But what happened when he came back left no doubt in my mind that those voices and strange feelings were

real. The doctor was gone for a few days, and then one morning, he just showed back up...but he was different. He declared his divinity to the whole camp and ordered everyone to worship him as the Storm Lord."

"I was right. The doctor has lost his mind."

"Hush. Let me continue. After Dr. Namdaot made this proclamation, the sky darkened and lightning began pounding the ground around the camp. The members of the team who were feeling the effects of that place the worst immediately dropped to their knees and started praying to him. It took others a little longer to come around, but eventually, everyone was enthralled by him. Everyone but me and my brother, Talper."

"I was going to ask about him. He doesn't look good."

"Yes, I fear he is dying. While everyone else was worshipping this Storm Lord, Talper yelled at him...called him a fraud. Dr. Namdaot looked at my brother with such venom and called him an unbeliever. Then he did something."

"What do you mean 'something'?"

"I don't really know. One moment, my brother was facing down Dr. Namdaot, and the next, he was lying on the ground writhing in pain. All the doctor did was wave his hand at him. Since then, Talper has been steadily getting worse. I don't think he will last very much longer, and as far as I can tell, there is nothing wrong with him. I can only assume that it is the doing of this Storm Lord."

"Is there anything that I can do?"

"Maybe. Just maybe. I have been paying close attention to the goings on in the camp, and I think I have an answer. The doctor immediately began sending his worshippers out to gather up more followers and I was wondering why. Well, it would seem that none of them survive very long. Almost all of the original followers are dead. I have seen their bodies....they look drained."

"I'm not following you."

"I think that the doctor is doing something to his followers that drain their life away from them. Perhaps this is the source of his power. If he didn't have so many people following him, maybe he would lose his strength, and he would lose power over my brother. I know it is a long shot, but it is the only thing I can think of."

"We'll head up to the temple and see what we can do."

"Thank you so much for helping us."

Leaving behind a first aid kit and some rations, the rebels headed towards the old Jedi ruins to investigate what was happening.

"Wow, that was some story, eh?"

"You think there was any truth to it?"

"I don't know how much of it I believe but I'm sure something is going on up there."

A beeping comlink interrupted them. After receiving news from another team, there was a change of plans.

"Well, the others have found something about 1800 meters from here and they need the skiff. Can you handle this while I go get them across a flow?"

"Sure. Like Jalper said, there isn't anything up there except scavengers and some weakened archeologists. I'm sure I can handle that."

"Alright, I'm headed out then. Just watch your back and call for help if anything looks suspicious."

Breaking off solo, the commando headed towards the ruins on foot sure that he could handle it. However, when he approached the foothills at the base of the ruins, he was attacked by strangely dressed lackeys. They weren't well armed or well trained though their zeal

would make them a tough fight.

"Reporting in. The temple ruins are pretty heavily guarded by some sort of cult just like she said. They might be a little bit of trouble so I'll leave my comlink on as I head up to the temple."

Ornately dressed guards patrolled the temple from the outer grounds and all the way up to the top levels of the ruins. Approaching the archeologist's base camp, the commando pushed into hostile territory by the book. Minions and zealots attacked him from all sides. Blaster fire lit up the camp, and the situation quickly spun out of control. There were far more cult members than he expected.

Taking his eye off the battle for a split second to reach for his comlink, a temple zealot moved in quickly to deliver a surprise blow with a stun baton. There was a bright flash of energy, and then his world went dark.

Exploring Mustafar

The Coronet cantina was noisy and crowded. A popular music group was in town and running the local cantina circuit. I was just about to leave when a crusty old mercenary I used to run with strolled into the place with a young, green Twilek. She had a big bag of equipment and I watched them sit in the back corner and start talking to folks. To the untrained eye, it wouldn't look like much, but to me it was obvious. They had set up shop and were selling something. It could have been contraband or it could have been a simple situation where a couple of spacers were selling their honestly earned goods....but who am I kidding? It seems like everything these days is illegal and the Empire is shaking down every cantina I go to. They were up to something and I wanted a piece of the action.

Every time I sniff a little treasure, I want to know if there is more. I'm a professional treasure hunter by trade and this little set up these jokers are running in the back of the cantina is my kind of "want ads". Some call it "claim-jumping". I call it "finder's keepers".

I watched them a little longer and I could tell this was only a small cache of loot and my guess was they didn't get everything. I heard the

Twilek mention "Mining Facility" and "Old Republic" and I pretty much knew where they scored their goods. It was time to act fast! I pulled my crew together and we were off to hunt some treasure!

The crew and I were pretty sure that there must be some Imperial blockade or civil war battle clogging up the space lanes because we couldn't get any kind travel clearance, legal or otherwise. I figured we'd better keep a low profile anyway, so we caught a shuttle and shuffled off to Mustafar with everyone else to avoid being noticed.

Treasure-hunting is a sneaky business and the less heads we turned, the better.

We arrived on the little forgotten mining planet and just inside the facility, there was an old map. It cast a warm glow on the entrance and though it was old and hard to read, it did point out some basic areas, so at least we had a place to start. Treasure huntin' always starts off with a scouting mission, so I looked over the old map and added all the places I could find into my journal. That way, we'd be able to hit some of the busy points looking for clues to places that had treasure.

Things got off to a rough start. We were going over a bridge as careful as we could to avoid the splashing lava, but before we could cross, a Blistmok showed up at the other side. It was tougher than we expected, but my team's commando made short work of it. It became a habit.

We wandered from place to place and it felt like we were on a safari and not a treasure hunt. Fierce creatures were coming off the cliffs, out of caves and all the nooks and crannies we couldn't see. Still, the hides were pretty good and I'm sure we could get a fair credit for 'em back on the core worlds.

Once we got used to dealing with the planet's creatures, we were lucky enough to stumble across a Mustafarian scout. We paid him a handful of credits and he thought it was a fortune. He started singing a song that was music to my ears! He started telling us some crazy story about hunter-killer droids that were out of control. The miners and these malfunctioning droids had some sort of Mustafarian stand-off going on and they needed our help. A miner foreman named Chivos was happy to bring on some hired guns such as ourselves and we were

happy to take his money. If nothing else, I figured we could break even on this little trip if we couldn't find any treasure.

"GET DOWN! GET DOWN!" A spray of blaster fire lit up the landscape with flickering red, blue and green. I had to warn my crew, "These miners don't know a firefight like we do! Keep your wits about you!"

It was just the warning they needed as a splash of cold reality in their faces. I hadn't noticed it before but we were headed through a pass in the rocks - - a perfect spot for an ambush. The heat was making us all a little lazy, but we had to snap out of it. These miners were tough, but they weren't combat veterans like we were.

"Heat 'em up!" our commando bellowed (as he usually did before burning someone to a crisp). Droids marched out of the blind as we pushed farther into the pass. Plasma flame from his thrower cooked the droids that were trying to ambush us. The miners had moved to the rear of the march, letting us take point.

I heard my comlink beep. Chivos was trying to get me a message. I could barely hear it with the ruckus going on, "Take out the generator!" Ahh! A target!

I painted a target on the generator and my crew punished it with their blasters and heavy weapons. "Ka-BOOM!" the generator went up in a flash and a thundering explosion. Between the heat and the weapons, it wasn't much of a challenge. Now that the shield generator was down, the miners suddenly got a streak of bravery. Miners from the back of our line, from up in the cliffs, coming out of bunkers, miners were coming out places I didn't even know were there! (How they avoided all the critters that were hidin' in those places, I'll never know).

"C'mon crew, it's time to get out of this scrap and find some treasure." The firefight heated up, but we weren't here to win anyone's liberation or help one side or the other, we were in it for treasure! We could come back later and "negotiate" for our fee later. This little party was getting too hot for our purposes so it was time to go.

"Cap'n! Cap'n! I finally cracked the system. We got something!"

Finally! We finally caught a break! After cutting out of that Mustafarian stand-off between the miners and droids, I was starting to get a little worried that this trip would be all trouble and no profit. We stumbled across an old republic cruiser - - it wasn't too hard to find. If those joker's back on Corellia were selling decent treasure and they found it here, it was a good bet this place was stripped clean. Luckily enough, the ship's old artificial intelligence was in tact.

"Captain!" I was in a daze thinking about how to make more money when my officer tried to get my attention.

"Your attention for a moment Cap'n."

"What?"

"This old ship AI had something stuck in its memory banks that I think we can use. It has the coordinates of a cavern. There is another facility in the cavern that we can transfer the AI of ship into. It should still be active and it might have just what we're looking for."

I knew that couldn't be everything.

"Captain, there's something else here."

"Something else? What is it?"

The other break we caught is that the ship's AI knew how to increase the output of the mining facility. I'm sure Chivos would pay us something for that, "How do we make the switch?"

"It looks like there is a satellite uplink relay that can make the transfer." Score!

I was sure that this would lead us to a rich stash to plunder! We located the cave and started heading in when I heard our Commando start to complain, "Beetles....why'd it have to be Beetles?"

We fought our way through the Kubaza beetles. Those critters pack a nasty bite, but it wasn't anything we couldn't handle. From there we caught another break and found clues to the old republic facility. We bumped into an old historian named Epo Qetora. He mention something about a young Twilek upstart and once we showed some interest in him, the old guy was more than happy to tell us his stories.

Most of it was worthless, but we listened to what he had to say. While the old historian droned on, I remembered that young Twilek back in the cantina mentioned something about an old republic bunker, so I knew we were getting closer to a key stash.

When we found the place, it was obvious it had been abandoned a long time - - probably since the Old Republic was crushed by the Empire. That was good for us though. Hopefully, the place hadn't been emptied by looters and treasure hunters before us. I was almost sure that we'd find something that would bring in some profit.

The old man's words came back to me when we found the place, "If you can enter into the facility and reactivate a computer you might be able to locate information I need." I don't care about what he needed. I only care about what I needed.

"Can you get this old computer back online so we can turn off the defenses?"

She was a legendary spy: door after door; she was able to get power to old doors, find access cards to others; every step of the way, she got us to the next level.

"I can't believe you didn't know the AI was a homicidal maniac!"

Blaster fire punctuated the angry remarks from my team mates. We had followed this AI from the crashed ship to the Republic Facility and then on to an old Neimoidian droid factory. Who knew those witless traders were trying to create a new droid army based on the HK-47 prototype...

"WATCH OUT!"

Explosions rocked the canyon as we traveled from the old droid factory looking for a way out. As crazy as it seemed, we were headed back to the Mustafarian stand-off we left behind earlier.

"Now I get it!"

"Get what?"

"Now I know what's with those rogue droids! That crazy HK AI had those things trying to help him get his body back and now they're trying to help him get off the planet!"

By this time, the miner's were starting to win. It was luck (which we had a lot of on this trip for some reason), but with us fighting our way into the Old Republic facility, it led us on a merry chase that was going to end up where we started! If I played our cards right, we might be able to come out of this looking like heroes and catch another payoff from the miners.

This sure had been some trip. Fierce beasts chasing us, a crazy artificial intelligence left over from the Old Republic tricking us into helping him find his body, battling a homicidal droid army, saving some miners from certain destruction and making a huge score of loot to sell back on the core worlds. That was the important part....loot.

Trials of Obi-Wan: Points of Interest

Mensix Mining Facility

Deep in the bowels of the huge mining facility an outburst echoed through the hallways, "I've had it with this contract!" He paced back and forth across the control room fiddling with a datapad and shaking it around wildly in the air after his calculations all ended with the same answer: the mining facility couldn't produce enough materials for a very important contract.

"Shhh - - be quiet or they'll hear you fool." We had to be quiet. Every little sound we made echoed through the metal hallways of the mining facility. We stood still and we listened.

"Chivos! Why don't the workers have supplies? We NEED supplies for the crews so we can honor this contract!" The veins on Milo's temples throbbed with frustration and anger.

Chivos was almost afraid to answer, "Sir, The field crews have not been getting their supplies because the droids that usually make the deliveries are all on the fritz. We've done everything we..."

"Well it's not good enough! You know this contract is with the Empire and if we don't supply them with what we need, WE won't be alive long enough to worry about it". Milo scowled at his friend and head foreman, "You know what I mean by 'WE' don't you?" That's right. If WE don't come up with some answers, WE are going to be in a lot of trouble and faulty droids and angry miners are going to be the least of our worries." Both of them winced as an alarm klaxon started screaming a warning.

We all jumped at the sound of the alarm, fearing we had triggered something. Our commander looked over at me. I checked my readout and looked back at him, shaking my head "no" (quietly telling him that we didn't set off the alarm).

"What's wrong now?" Milo barked in frustration.

"It's the Air Filters sir. The ventilation system has been breaking down because we're pushing the facility so hard. We were only set up to process 5000 metric tons of raw materials from the lava every day and you've has us pulling over 6000 and you want more! If we give you any more, this facility is going to be history!

"TURN THAT ALARM OFF...I can't think".

Chivos waved an approving hand at one of the plant operators who quickly disabled the alarm. Chivos kept everything under control,

"You...you there! Have the miners on level 6 drop what they are doing and get those vent filters replaced right away! ...and make sure they get back to work when they finish." The compliant mustafarian operator quickly left the room. That left Milo and Chivos alone to talk

about what was going on.

We were all glad that he turned off the alarm. The commander motioned and we all hid.

In low whispers, partly to keep his voice from carrying and partly because he feared the Emperor could hear him across the galaxy, he spoke to his trusted friend in a respectful tone, "I don't know what we're going to do Chivos. Vader made me agree to the terms of this contract and if we don't comply, we won't live long enough to see this facility fall apart from the stress. The crazy thing is that when I took this contract, I had no idea they would need so much material. What in the name of the old republic are they building?" The two friends looked at each other with grim eyes.

The commander looked at us and motioned. Now was the time. We all stood up, stood proud and followed our commander.

Just when they were about to lose hope, eight strangers walked in,

"We can help you and we can do it without any Imperial entanglements...old buddy."

Milo grinned, "Now there's an ugly face I haven't seen in a long, long time."

I didn't know what to do. I thought we were sneaking in to do a job and now the commander blows our cover? I wondered what was going on.

Milo looked at the old mercenary and then back at Chivos, "It looks like help has just arrived. I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine..."

The Mystery of the Old Republic Facility

A young Twilek with green skin and yellow lekku fiddled with a control panel, disarming the alarms and quietly watched as the door to the underground mustafarian bunker shooshed open. She thought to herself, "My, what a luxurious home for such a horrible planet". She darted down the hallway and into the elevator. Whispering under her

breath, "Well, at this point it doesn't matter if he knows I'm coming now or not..."

The elevator took her to the main floor of the house almost instantly. At first it seemed as if no one was home, though she didn't want to take any chances. She didn't make a sound as she padded down the hallway looking for something...or someone.

"I hear you. Come out where I can see you..."

She froze in her tracks. Quickly she put her helmet back on to hide her face and drew her blaster.

"Don't worry, I won't call the authorities. Come out where I can see you."

Bravely, the young twilek strolled out into the living room with her blaster pointing at the old man. "You, you there. Are you Epo Quetora?"

The old twilek smiled as the young smuggler showed herself. "Tell me why you've come here my dear. Have you come to the Planet of Mustafar in the hope of finding treasure? Have you come in the hopes of finding something long forgotten?"

Her voice echoed inside the helmet, "That's right. I've come here for treasure and I was told that you know the way to the Old Republic Facility."

Epo grinned.

"Of course I know the way. I'm the historian." Epo held up his forearm revealing a gruesome scar. "That's where I got this scar and I almost didn't make it out..."

She cut him off in mid-sentence.

"Listen old man, I don't care about your troubles. Tell me how to get there, and no tricks! Tell me now!" She waved her blaster around menacingly, but it didn't seem to phase the old man.

The young smuggler started to lose her cool in the face of the old Historian's calm demeanor. He chuckled to himself and started rambling, "There are no records that go back more than a few hundred years and yet this planet has been around for a very long time..."

"SHUT UP and tell me how to get there. TELL ME NOW!"

The old historian grimaced and tossed a datapad to her, "It's all there. I'd tell you to be careful, but you won't listen."

She sneered at Epo while quickly glancing at the datapad. "I've had enough out of you. And this better be the right map, or I'm going to come back and teach you a lesson! Got it?"

Epo lost interest in the young smuggler and turned his thoughts back to his studies. Without paying any more attention to her, he mumbled, "It's the right way. Now leave me alone."

That was the last time anyone ever heard from the young smuggler again.

Temple Ruins and rumors of the Storm Lord

The air shimmered and rippled as heat from the lava flowed by the ancient temple. We stood there at the bottom of the hill and caught our breath (as much of a breath as you can take standing on the edge of a lava field). After getting the mining facility back online and escaping the Old Republic facility, I thought I'd seen it all, but here it was; Ancient Jedi Temple Ruins. We made our way down the rocks, taking care not to fall, and went down into the ravine. As we got closer to the old ruins, we could feel a force...a dark force. It was making everyone nervous. To keep everyone from getting too edgy, the commander started going over the mission details to keep us focused.

"Keep time people. Let's keep moving!" The commander kept us talking, "What was it that reporter told us?"

A large black and gray wookiee started grunting and telling his story.

"Not you! You know I can't speak Shyriiwook!" Some of us laughed.

Whatever it was that was closing in on us was making me nervous, so I recounted the reporter's story, "She said it was some archeologist. His name was Namdot. Professor Namdot. She said he went crazy in these ruins. She said he went crazy and started calling himself the storm lord. He got mixed up in something at the temple ruins."

"Mixed up in something? What does that mean?" Just then, the sound of a falling rock echoed off of a nearby wall. We almost didn't hear it. "Stand tall people. Something's out there. Lock and load!"

The commander's orders came just in time. Crazy humanoids came jumping over the wall and running towards us. Our group opened fire.

Blaster fire filled the air as the crazies charged us. "Don't stop until they're all dead!" We all fired at them, but they just kept coming. We did everything we could to stop them, but then the lightning came.

"Lightning? Where is that lightning coming from? Move people, move! Get out of here!"

We escaped with our lives. Just barely. We were attacked by crazy humanoids and an even crazier human calling himself the "storm lord". We all thought the story was just some dumb reporter trying to get us to keep our noses out her story, but it was all true.

So if you go there, bring friends. Bring friends and be careful because you might not make it back.

Treasures of Mustafar

Givetame!

No!

Whaddya mean, "No?" Listen ya little green skinned nerf-herder, givetame now before we both get hurt!

"Who you callin' nerf-herder ya big stinky Gundark!

The young Twilek smuggler brandished the old republic weapon at her would-be partner in the treasure hunt. Young and inexperienced, she waved it about without thinking and brushed up against the stock of the long lost weapon. A flash of blue flame gushed from the nozzle lighting up night as they walked out of the forgotten fortress. She gasped, "Ooops!"

The burly man just scowled, knowing he had just come so close to death that he probably used up some of his good luck. He barked at his partner, "...I told you it was dangerous. Matter of fact, *you're* the one who snuck in here and almost got herself killed. If it weren't for me..."

She barked back, "If it weren't for me, *you'd* be dead you crusty old merc. We've had a good group in here and we saved each other a bunch of times. Let's just get back to the ship, off this forgotten rock and check out all the treasure!"

Both of their eyes sparkled. It had been a successful raid on a dangerous planet, deep in a dangerous facility and now it was time to enjoy the fruits of their labor....

Interlude at Darkknell

"Senator Bel Iblis?"

Garm Bel Iblis looked up from his datapad, frowning with the subtle tension of prespeech jitters. The man standing in the doorway was the assistant director at the Treitamma Political Center, charged with the responsibility of smoothing any obstacles that might impede the firm step and stalwart tread of an exalted member of the Imperial Senate.

Or so the gentleman had gravely explained upon Bel Iblis's arrival this afternoon. Clearly the Anchoron reputation for flowery speech and genteel decorum had found a focal point here at the Treitamma.

Which was going to make the bluntness of his speech tonight all the more shocking. The dark truth about Emperor Palpatine and his secret agenda for his newly established Empire...

He shook his head briefly in annoyance. Assistant Director Graskt was still waiting patiently, and here he was letting his mind drift. It showed just how seriously this speech-and the situation it represented-had taken over his every waking thought. "Yes, AsDir Graskt, what is it?" he asked.

"A gentleman from your staff has just arrived from Coruscant," Graskt said, stepping forward and holding out a datacard. "He asked me to deliver this to you right away."

"Thank you," Bel Iblis said, the hairs on the back of his neck tingling as he reached across the desk and took the datacard. Sena would never send a package to him without making sure the courier had his private comlink frequency. The fact that there had been no calls concerning any such arrivals.

..

He slid the datacard into his datapad. There was nothing on it but a single line: "Meet me at the northeast exit. Urgent. Aach."

"Will there be a return message, Senator?" Graskt asked.

"No, that's all right," Bel Iblis said, long experience in the political arena enabling him to keep the sudden tension out of his voice and face. Aach was the code name of a special messenger from Bail Organa, a messenger the Alderaanian viceroy used only for top-level Rebel Alliance business.

"Would you like to speak with the gentleman?" Graskt persisted. "I asked him to wait at the main entrance."

"That won't be necessary," Bel Iblis said. The last thing he could afford was for the two of them to be seen in public together. Besides, Aach had undoubtedly slipped away by now for their more private meeting. "I'll have plenty of time to see him after my speech."

"Then the message does not in fact bespeak a crisis?" Graskt asked.

Bel Iblis felt the skin around his eyes crinkle as his eyes narrowed slightly. For someone who had struck him as having taken a double helping of the

traditional An-choroni politeness, Graskt was suddenly being uncharacteristically nosy.

Unless Aach had overplayed his hand in order to make sure the datacard was delivered. But that didn't seem likely. Could Graskt be a spy for Palpatine, here to keep an eye on him?

He felt a flash of annoyance. No-that was absurd. The man was probably just trying to be helpful. "To middle-level staffers, all news bulletins mean a crisis must be happening somewhere," he improvised, giving Graskt an easy smile. "It's important enough, but hardly a crisis. Certainly not worth delaying my speech for." He looked at his chrono. "Which reminds me, I'm due on stage in fifteen minutes, and I still have to change."

"I'll leave you to your preparations, then," Graskt said. "Good evening, sir." He bowed deeply and backed out of the room.

Bel Iblis gave him a fifty-count and then followed. The Treitamma's northeast exit was off the group of backstage rooms to the left of the main stage, about as far away from the bustling main entrance as it was possible to get. Bel Iblis eased noiselessly down the stairway, alert for the various staffers hurrying around making final preparations for the evening's round of speeches, and slipped outside.

A landspeeder was parked in the service alleyway behind the Treitamma, gray and muted in the dim evening light. Standing on the far side of the vehicle, pressed into what little shadow there was trying to watch all directions at once, was Aach.

Bel Iblis crossed the alleyway toward him, trying to suppress a grimace and not entirely succeeding. This cloak-and-blade mentality was going to be the end of them yet. "Not being too obvious, are we?" he suggested tartly as he rounded the front of the landspeeder and stopped, facing the other.

"Your preparation room seemed a bit too public for a meeting," Aach countered, his voice as calm as his face. "Would you rather I showed up at your hotel room after the speech? That could have proved a bit awkward."

Bel Iblis felt his lip twitch. Awkward, unfortunately, was hardly the word for it. His wife Arrianya, a daughter of the old Core World families, had an

unreserved and totally unwavering faith in Palpatine and his Empire, a faith that had first astonished, then baffled, then finally frustrated him. The clash of their differing political views had cast a chill over their marriage the past few months, and had dropped their two children into the middle of what was all too often a verbal war zone.

The speech he was about to make out there on the Treitamma stage was going to upset Arrianya enough as it was. All he needed was for a shadowy messenger from Bail to show up in the middle of the inevitable argument afterward. "What's the message?" he growled.

In the dim light he saw Aach's mouth twitch. "Sorry, Senator. I didn't mean-"

"I know you didn't," Bel Iblis said. "What's the message?"

Aach looked around the area again. "There's been a breakthrough," he said, lowering his voice to something barely above a whisper. "We've located Tarkin's project."

Bel Iblis felt his throat go suddenly dry.

"Where is it?"

"I don't know," Aach said. "All I know is that a courier will be in the Continuum Void tapcafe in the city of Xakrea on Darkknell in three days with some inside information about it. Bail wants you to send your most trusted aide to rendezvous with him and pick up his datapack."

Courier. Bel Iblis glanced around, a bad taste in his mouth. A three would get you the sabacc pot that this so - called "courier" was in fact the thief who'd stolen the datapack in the first place. A minor military figure, most likely, either a trooper or perhaps a clerk attached to the project.

And two would get you the sabacc pot that his actions hadn't been motivated by anything as selfless as love of the Republic. "And how much am I supposed to pay him?"

Aach hesitated, just noticeably. "Bail basically said to give him whatever he wants. Look, we need this information-was

"Yes, yes, I understand," Bel Iblis cut him off. "If we can't get honest patriotism, we'll settle for honest greed."

"That'll change," Aach promised, a quiet fire simmering in his voice. "As soon as Palpatine's agenda finally becomes clear, we'll have the whole Republic flocking to our side."

"I'd settle for the top five percent of the Imperial Academy," Bel Iblis said sourly. Now was not the time for brooding about Palpatine's maddening talent for pulling the cloak over people's eyes. "Fine. I'll get one of my people on it as soon as I finish my-was

And with a brilliant flash, the Treitamma Political Center blew up.

Bel Iblis was lying on the ground when he fumbled his way back to consciousness, pressed up against the wall of the building across the alleyway on one side with what was left of the landspeeder looming over him on the other. Behind the landspeeder a ragged section of wall where the Treitamma had been was burning furiously, bathing the whole area with an unreal-looking blaze of yellow light and pouring black smoke into the sky.

"Senator?"

Bel Iblis blinked, shifting his eyes upward. Aach was kneeling over him, a gash in the side of his face streaming blood. "Come on, Senator, we've got to get you out of here," he said urgently, tugging on his arm. "Can you stand? "

"I think so," Bel Iblis said, gathering his feet beneath him. He looked over at the burning building again as Aach helped him to his feet...

And abruptly the haze blanketing his mind seemed to flash-burn away. "Arrianya!" he gasped. "Aach-my wife and children-was

"They're gone. Senator," Aach said, his voice suddenly vicious. "And you're going to be next if we don't get you out of here right away."

"Leave me alone!" Bel Iblis snarled, trying to push Aach's hand away and staggering as his trembling legs nearly collapsed again beneath him. "I've got to get to them. Let me alone."

"No," Aach bit back, tightening his grip on Bel Iblis's arm. "Don't you see? You're the only one they were trying to kill in there. Y."

Bel Iblis stared at the blazing building, a jolt of fresh pain and emptiness and anger twisting together and cutting into him. No. No-it couldn't be. Destroy a whole building-kill dozens or even hundreds of people-just to get at him? It was insane.

"Looks like they used a thermal detonator," Aach said, half leading, half pulling Bel Iblis down the alleyway away from the wrecked landspeeder. "Shaped to bring down the Treitamma without demolishing the whole neighborhood. Most likely planted somewhere near your preparation room."

And Arrianya and the children had been in the private refreshment center chatting with the chief director. Only two rooms away...

They had reached the end of the alleyway by now. Around the corner of the demolished building, over by the sides and front, Bel Iblis could see a crowd had already gathered, their features unreadable through the smoke and heat-shimmered air. Their screams and shouts, barely audible over the roar of the flames, were like a stab of pain in his heart.

"Over here," Aach said, pulling him toward a landspeeder parked at the side of the street, its front end crumpled and blistered by the explosion. "You can take my ship-I'll get back to Alderaan some other way." He pulled open the door and guided Bel Iblis into the passenger seat.

Another layer of the mental haze suddenly cleared from Bel Iblis's mind. "Wait a minute," he protested, half in and half out of the vehicle.

"Arrianya and the children-I can't just leave them."

"You have to," Aach said, his voice bitter but firm. "Didn't you hear me? You were the target, Senator. You still are. We've got to get you to safety before they realize they missed and try again."

He closed the door on Bel Iblis and hurried around to the other side. "But what if they're alive?" Bel Iblis demanded, fumbling for the door release as Aach dropped into the driver's seat. "I can't just leave them."

"They're dead, Senator," Aach said quietly, his face in shadow as he hunched forward and reached up under the control board. "Everyone who was inside is gone, either from the blast itself or from the building's collapse. Whoever Palpatine sent to do the job was very thorough."

With a jolt, the landspeeder started up.

"Yes," Bel Iblis murmured, taking one final look at the burning building as Aach spun the vehicle around and headed in the other direction, down the street. "He was indeed."

"And he's not going to give up now," Aach added, pulling hard to the side to get out of the way of a fleet of Extinguisher speeder trucks as they raced past toward the conflagration. A waste of effort, Bel Iblis thought numbly as they passed. There was nothing anyone could do now. "You're going to have to go underground until Bail and Mon Mothma can backtrack this and identify whoever was responsible."

"I suppose so," Bel Iblis said. His left shoulder felt cold, and he looked down to see that the top of his coat there had been torn completely away by some bit of flying debris that the bulk of Aach's landspeeder hadn't protected him from. Odd—he wondered why he hadn't noticed that before.

He was suddenly aware of a watchful silence, and looked over to find Aach eyeing him warily. "Are you all right, Senator?" the other asked. "Did you hear what I said? You have to go away somewhere and hide."

"Yes, I heard you," Bel Iblis said, the pain inside him beginning to give way to a black and simmering anger. In that single instant, a moment frozen forever in time, Palpatine had taken away from him everything he held dear. His wife, his children, his career. His life.

Everything, that is, but one. "And I'll be all right," he went on, "When Palpatine is dead, and what was once the Republic has been restored."

"I understand," Aach murmured. "You're one of us now. Senator."

Bel Iblis frowned at him. "What are you talking about? I've been part of the Rebel Alliance since it was first formed."

"But you were with us for other reasons," Aach said. "Political reasons like Palpatine's abuse of power, or idealistic reasons like erosion of personal freedom or the anti-alien biases drifting into the legal system."

The muscles in his jaw tightened briefly. "Now Palpatine has hurt you. Not someone else, but you. Now it's personal."

Bel Iblis took a deep breath. "Maybe it is," he conceded. "On the other hand, maybe that's exactly what he wants: to trick us into thinking we're fighting him for purely personal reasons."

"What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong is that that kind of battle is driven by emotion," Bel Iblis said. "Eventually, the emotion burns away, and then your reason for continuing the fight is gone."

He fingered the edges of the hole in his coat. "But we're not going to fall into t trap. He can do anything he wants to me-can take anything away from me that he will. I'll still fight him because it's the right thing to do. Period."

For a few minutes they drove on in silence. On the rear display the burning shell gradually receded behind the other buildings of the city, leaving only an angry black-orange pillar of smoke to mark his family's funeral pyre. It seemed terribly wrong somehow to be running away like this, as if he were casually and cavalierly brushing aside their lives and dishonoring their memory.

But no. They were dead, and the dishonor of their blood was solely on Palpatine's hands. All that was left for him now was to do whatever he could to prevent others from dying in the same violent and useless way.

And if the whispered rumors he'd heard about this Death Star project of Tarkin's were even close to the actual truth... "You said I could take your ship?" he asked Aach.

"Yes, if you feel up to flying it yourself," the other said. "I was thinking I might stay around here a day or two anyway."

"Why? To see if you can find a direct link back to Pal patine?" Bel Iblis shook his head. "I can tell you right now you'll be wasting your time."

"It's my time to waste. Is there a place where you can hide out for a while?"

"There are a couple of possibilities," Bel Iblis said. "But first I have an appointment to keep on Darkknell."

"Darkknell?" Aach threw Bel Iblis a startled look. "You?"

"Why not?" Bel Iblis countered. "Who better to make the pickup than someone who's supposed to be dead anyway? My schedule is now meaningless, you know. And I have no one to miss me if I'm out of sight for a few days. Not anymore."

"But-was Aach floundered a moment. "Sir, this could be dangerous-any contact with informants has that potential. You're not trained for this sort offieldwork."

"I did my stint in the military," Bel Iblis reminded him. "I know how to handle a blaster. And I know a bit about disguise, too. I won't be recognized. "

"But... was..."

"Besides," Bel Iblis cut him off quietly, "I need to do something useful right now. Something to help take my mind off... whatjust happened back there. "

Aach exhaled softly in resignation. "All right, sir. Before you go, though, I'll give you a letter of introduction to someone I know in Xakrea you can contact if you get in trouble. He doesn't have any particular sympathy for the Rebellion, but he doesn't much care for Palpatine's Empire, either. He's got a lot of contacts among smugglers and other fringe types on Darkknell, which may come in handy if you have to get off the planet in a hurry."

"It may," Bel Iblis agreed, noting with a somewhat grim amusement that Aach had carefully refrained from mentioning his friend's own status within the fringe society. A smuggler himself, or perhaps a dealer of stolen goods? Or something even more unsavory?

Still, if it came to that, the Rebel Alliance certainly had its own share of unsavory characters. Some had probably been pulled in by the hope of quick profits-- though those who had had most likely been disillusioned in record

time on that one-but others were among the Alliance's most tenacious and effective fighters. "Do you trust him?"

Aach shrugged, a bit uncomfortably. "I think so, provided as you don't push him too hard or ask too much. Or tell him who you are or who you're working for. Anyway, he owes me a couple of favors."

"I see," Bel Iblis murmured. "It's always comforting to have allies."

"I could still go with you," Aach offered, a clear note of reluctance lurking beneath the words. "I was supposed to head back to Alderaan. Under the circumstances I know Bail would understand."

"No," Bel Iblis said firmly. "Bail undoubtedly needs you elsewhere, and I can do this myself. You just help me get off Anchoron, and then you're on your own."

Aach hesitated, then nodded. "All right, Senator. If you insist."

Bel Iblis looked back at the rear display, his eyes drawn unwillingly to the roiling tower of black smoke behind them. The shock was starting to wear off now, and a myriad of small injuries and throbbing pains were beginning to make themselves felt across his body.

But none of it could come even close to the bitter ache in his heart. Arrianya and the children... "Yes," he said quietly. "I insist."

The man sitting alone at the table across the crowded tapcafe was blond and fairly short, with the darting eyes and twitching mouth of someone who was somewhere he didn't want to be. Not much more than a kid, really, which could explain his discomfort at being in such a villainous lair of vile laxity as the Continuum Void.

On the other hand, his stiff back had an air of the Imperial military about it, and if there was one safe bet in this galaxy, it was that military types and tapcafes rarely needed to be formally introduced.

Moranda Savich sipped at her pale blue drink, wincing at the unfamiliar tang, continuing to study the kid even as she chided herself for letting her thoughts wander off target that way. The only reason she was on Dark knell in the first place, after all, was that it wasn't Kreeling or Dorsis or Mantarran. Inspector

Hal Horn of Corellian Security had already tracked her to and chased her off all those worlds, and most likely he'd continue his winning streak by tracking her here, too. The sooner she figured out a quiet way off this rock, the better her chances of staying ahead of him until he gave up and went home.

She snorted gently. Fat chance. Horn wasn't going to give up, at least not in her lifetime. The man was one of that supremely irritating class of law enforcers who combined the menace of incorruptibility with the annoyance of not knowing when to quit.

Across the tapcafe, the kid slipped a hand beneath the left side of his jacket as he glanced around. The second time he'd done that, Moranda noted, in the past ten minutes. Must be something he was having to reassure himself was still there...

Stop it! she ordered herself sternly. She was on the run, and on the run was no time to be swinging for a scratch. Stirring up the locals with a score would be completely counterproductive, especially if she stirred them up enough to catch her with spice or dealies or whatever the kid was carrying that was making him so nervous.

He lifted his cup to his lips, half turning to throw a look toward the tapcafe door, his ninth such check since Moranda had been watching. As he did so, his jacket stretched momentarily against the object in his pocket, giving her a brief glimpse of its shape. It was square, slightly larger than a datacard, but considerably thicker.

A datapack? Could be. Probably with six to ten datacards, judging from the thickness, snugged together in a protective case.

Moranda swirled the blue liqueur thoughtfully in her glass. Well, now. A datapack put a very different perspective on things. Every police and security operative knew spice and other contraband items on sight or smell or taste; but a simple, innocent-looking datapack was another matter entirely. It was something anyone might be carrying, something that even the most suspicious mouth-breather would have to go to great lengths to prove wasn't her property in the first place.

More to the point, it was something that was likely worth hard, cold money. And money was what she needed if she was going to get out of here ahead of Inspector Horn and his fistful of Corellian warrants.

Which left only one question: how to get the datapack away from its nervous owner without getting caught doing it.

The glowing sign marking the 'fresher stations was against the wall on the far side of the kid's table. Refilling her drink from the carafe, she got up and ambled in that direction, putting a slightly tipsy hesitation into her movements. His jacket was cut Preter style, she noted with a single casual glance as she strolled past him, the sort with a deep inside pocket positioned beneath the armhole on either side. Possibly fastened at the top, but probably not seriously sealed. Still, with the youth hunched over the table the way he was, the only way to get at the datapack would be for her to get him to take the jacket at least partially off.

But that was okay. She enjoyed a challenge.

The 'fresher stations were like the rest of the Continuum Void: old and more than slightly dilapidated. Sealing herself into one, she set her drink down on the crumble-edged shelf and got to work.

The small tiles lining the station were the first target.

Pulling out her knife, she pried two of them off the wall, then carefully trimmed them down to datacard size. Beneath the dies was a layer of the low-quality honeycomb that served as a passive air filter in low-tier places like this one; a double layer of that sandwiched between her two dies added the required thickness. One of her diaphanous black scarves wrapped lightly around the pack to hold it together and it was finished. The object didn't look anything like a datapack, but it was the right size and shape and weight. With the proper distraction and the right moves, and maybe a little bit of luck tossed in, it should work.

After digging into her hip pack for a stray cigarra she kept around for just such occasions, she lit it and stuck it between two fingers of her right hand, picking up her glass of liqueur with the fingertips of the same hand. Then, with the decoy datapack concealed as best she could in her left hand, she unsealed the door and headed back into the main tapcafe room.

The kid hadn't moved in the few minutes she'd been gone, nor had the contact he was obviously expecting made an appearance. Holding her decoy datapack unobtrusively at her side, putting a noticeable stagger into her walk now, she started through the crowd toward her table, this time heading for the narrow gap behind the kid. She dodged a drunk Barrckli, sent a warning glare at an unshaven nerf herder type who looked as if he might be starting to get ideas about her, and passed behind the kid-Andwitha sudden lurch as if she'd been tripped, she fell heavily against the back of his chair and splashed the contents of her glass across the burning tip of her cigarra onto the back of his jacket.

The liqueur ignited with a muffled whoosh into a small but very satisfying fireball.

"Look out!" Moranda gasped, dropping both glass and cigarra onto the floor and grabbing over his right shoulder for the edge of the tablecloth. She yanked it toward her, scattering glasses and tableware in all directions as she hauled it past the side of his head toward the flames dancing across the back of his jacket. Simultaneously, she tugged at the left lapel with the fingertips of her left hand. Reflexively, he swung his left arm back in response, giving her the necessary slack for pulling the blazing garment away from the back of his neck.

And as she slapped vigorously at the already dying flames with the tablecloth, her left hand dipped down into the inside jacket pocket, lifting out the datapack and leaving her decoy behind in its place.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated over and over in her best embarrassed voice, still pounding the tablecloth across his shoulders even though the fire was already out as she slipped her prize into her hip pack behind her datapad. "So terribly sorry. My ankle went and-are you all right?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," the kid growled, twisting half around to his right and grabbing at the tablecloth. "It's out now, right?"

"Oh yes," she said, giving his back one final slap before letting him pull the now wadded tablecloth away from her. "I'm so sorry. Can I buy you a drink?"

"No, forget it," he said, waving her away and trying to turn a little farther around. Trying for a clearer look at her? "Just go away and leave me alone."

"Sure, of course," Moranda said, easing around as she pretended to resetttle his jacket back onto his shoulders, staying just out of his sight. Out of the corner of his eye she saw his hand steal beneath his jacket to the pocket. The fingers probed the shape other decoy and fell away, apparently reassured. "I'm so sorry."

"Go away," he repeated, starting to sound a little angry now. Clearly he wasn't happy at having all this attention focused his way.

"Yeah, sure." Moranda stepped away to his left, and as he twisted his head in that direction, still trying for a clear look at her face, she turned her back to him and worked her way through the crowd toward her table.

She reached it but didn't sit down. The kid's buyer could be here any time now, and she had no intention of being anywhere in the vicinity when he hauled her decoy triumphantly out of his pocket. Leaving the price of her drink on the table, she slouched her way to the door and out into the tangy Darkknell air. Time to find a nice, quiet place to go to ground for a while and see just what it was she'd scored.

Bel Iblis stared across the tapcafe table at the young blond man, a sense of unreality thudding through his brain in time with the pulse pounding in his neck. "What do you mean, you lost it?" he demanded in a low voice. "How do you lose an entire datapack? Especially from within your own coat pocket?"

"Don't use that tone with me, friend," the other growled back, his eyes darting nervously around the half-empty room. "And if you're hinting that I'm trying to repulorlift my price, you'd better think again. I took a huge risk getting that stuff and bringing it here. A huge risk. I'm not any happier than you are that it got lifted."

Bel Iblis took a careful breath, trying to throttle back his growing anger. He might not be a Rebel field operative like Aach, but he knew how to read people, and the youth's face and voice had the ring of truth in them.

Which meant they were both now squarely in the middle of an incredibly dangerous position. The minute the thief realized what it was she'd found... "Is there any way they can trace it back to you?" He asked quietly.

The young man snorted into his cup. "Sure, if they really want to go to that much effort. Knowing Tarkin's reputation, they probably will."

"Then we'll just have to get it back."

The kid snorted again. "You can go looking under rocks for it if you want. Me, I'm heading for the tall weeds while I still can."

"You run now and they'll know for sure you were the one who lifted the data," Bel Iblis warned.

"Like that's going to matter any," the other countered harshly, draining his cup and bringing it back down onto the table with an unnecessarily loud thud.

"She's not going to sit on this long, you know. And the minute she turns it in, the spaceport's going to be locked down solid while Tarkin's people fan out across the planet. You want to wait for that to happen, you be my guest."

He stood up. "So long, have fun, and forget you ever saw me."

He strode across the room and vanished out the door. "I'll try," Bel Iblis murmured after him. Taking a sip from his mug, he tried to think.

Because his erstwhile drinking companion was wrong. The thief wouldn't hand her prize over to the authorities just like that. Someone cool enough to lift a data pack in the middle of a crowded tapcafe would also be cool enough to try to turn a profit from her acquisition. And that meant selling the datapack.

Which left only the question of how to persuade her to sell to the Rebel Alliance instead of the Empire.

Fishing in his pocket for some coins, he dropped them onto the table beside his mug and headed for the door. One thing that was certain was that he wasn't going to be able to track her down in a city the size of Xakrea by himself. That meant someone with connections in the planet's fringe population; and that meant getting in touch with Aach's local contact.

He hoped the man owed Aach a lot of favors.

The room was small and dark and sparse, a sharp contrast to the bright lights and scrollwork and expensive glitter that was the norm throughout the rest of

the Imperial Palace. It was a shock to most of the uninitiated who came into x, and even those who knew what to expect invariably wasted their first few minutes adjusting their eyes and minds to the contrast.

Which was precisely how Armand Isard liked it. Off balance people were vulnerable people, and vulnerability was one of his favorite qualities in enemies and allies alike. For allies, after all, were merely people who had not yet outlived their usefulness to the Empire, the Emperor, and Isard himself.

Ultimately, invariably, all of them did.

His comlink pinged. "Director Isard?" his aide's voice came from the speaker. "Field Operative Isard has arrived."

"Send her in," Armand instructed, allowing himself a smug smile. Not many men, he knew, had daughters who had thrown themselves so willingly and so self sacrificingly into theirthe father's line of work as had his Ysanne. Already an outstanding Intelligence agent, she had time and again demonstrated a vigor and ruthlessness in her pursuit of the Empire's enemies that had put even some Moffs to shame.

An attitude, fortunately, which was solidly backed up wascompetence and cleverness and efficiency. Nothing, in Armand's mind," was more contemptible than a shining eyed Intelligence agent whom smugglers and Rebels alike could fly casual rings around.

The smug smile faded. Clever and efficient, to be sure. But she was going to need every bit of her skill if she was to pull this one out of the fire.

The door slid open. "You summoned me?" Ysanne said gravely from the doorway.

"Sit down," Armand said in the same tone, feeling another flicker of pride as he gestured her toward a chair. No mention other being his daughter, with the underlying suggestion or invitation of preferential treatment such an acknowledgment might have implied. In this room, in this building, she was an agent and he was her director, and that was the totality of their relationship. "I have an important job for you."

"How important?" she asked as she lowered herself with sinuous grace into the chair.

"It could be a career-maker for you," he said. "It also could be a career-breaker for a large number of others."

Her eyes flickered, just noticeably. She had the Isard family ambition, too, the same ambition that had taken Armand himself to the top. "Tell me more."

Armand selected a datacard from a stack on his desk. "An eight-card datapack has been taken to Darkknell," he said, sliding the datacard across the desk toward her. "This datapack must at all costs be retrieved."

"Point of origin?"

"The Despayre system," Armand said, watching her face closely.

Once again, the brief flicker of her eyes showed that his long-held suspicion was correct. Despite the most stringent of security procedures, Ysanne had somehow managed to learn about the Death Star project, even to the point of knowing where the massive weapon was being constructed. "So you understand the seriousness of the situation," he went on. "Under the circumstances, I can hardly declare an Empirewide state of emergency and seal the Darkknell system with a ring of Star Destroyers."

"Certainly not for a project that doesn't officially even exist," Ysanne agreed, almost off-handedly. "I presume that also means you're not sending a full Intelligence force with me." Her eyebrows lifted slightly. "Or is there more to it than that? Is this theft somehow personal?"

Armand grimaced. "Personal enough," he conceded. "The suspected thief was given his security clearance by a close associate of mine, a man high up in our department, who will be in serious trouble if we can't retrieve the datapack before the Rebel Alliance gets hold of it. Or before someone else in Intelligence does."

Ysanne picked up the datacard. "Is the traitor's file in here?"

"The suspected traitor, yes," Armand said. "Along with several possibilities of who the Rebels might send to pick it up."

Ysanne nodded. "So you want me to retrieve the data pack, confirm the traitor's identity, and capture the Rebel agent. Is that it?"

Armand suppressed a smile. The famous Isard family confidence... "Or as much of that as you can manage in the time you'll have," he said. "I've ordered an interdiction of Darkknell's spaceports, but I doubt the local authorities will be able to keep them sealed for very long. Just remember that retrieving the datapack is the most important part of the job."

"Then I'd best get started," she said, sliding the datacard into a tunic pocket. "I presume it's all right for me to take one of my enforcers along."

"If you have to," Armand said. "Make sure it's someone you trust, and don't tell him what it is you're actually after."

"Of course not," she said, standing up. "You'll order me a courier ship?"

"It's already standing by," Armand told her. "Goodbye, and good luck."

She favored him with a faint smile. "The Isards make their own luck," she reminded him softly. "I'll be in touch."

Hal Horn sighed heavily as the Darkknell Defense Agency officer glanced at his identification card, travel permits, and the warrants he had brought with him. It seemed to Hal that every member of the Xakrean bureaucracy had studied those same datafiles with an intensity that suggested they were digitizing the data and loading it straight into their brains. He had come to Darkknell and specifically the city of Xakrea because the local officials' legendary attention to detail and hatred for disorder made them natural allies in his search for Moranda Savich.

Now I'm not so sure, he thought. He glanced down at the smaller, slighter man. "I think you'll see, Colonel Ny roska, that all my files are in order. All I really want is for you to issue an alert that will have your people looking for my target if she tries to leave the planet."

Nyroska's dark eyes narrowed. "You realize, of course, Inspector Horn, that you have absolutely no jurisdiction here."

"I do know that, but..."

"And while we are willing to cooperate with fellow officers of the law, long gone are the days of Jedi vigilantes traveling hither and thither, chasing miscreants and rendering harsh verdicts right then and there. The days of lightsaberjustice are no more."

"I understand. Colonel." Hal turned partway to the side, so his height and bulk wouldn't seem to be threatening to the Xakrean. "As per your regulations, I surrendered my blaster when I made planetfall and I have no weapons on me."

"Commendable, Inspector. And I think it good you remain in civilian clothes, so your presence cannot be misconstrued." Nyroska hit a button on his datapad, ejecting the datacard that contained Hal's documents. He toyed with it for a moment, then held it out to the Corellian. "Your quarry, this Savich, she is not a violent criminal? Nothing in her records indicates that she is."

"No, sir. She's just good at liberating valuables from the unwary."

"A lifter, then?"

"One of the best."

Nyroska stood abruptly, his oversized chair sliding back. The chair and the huge desk had helped dwarf Nyroska, but had not needed to work very hard to do so. He's even smaller than Corran! Hal catalogued that fact to use the next time his son complained about being short. The Colonel waved his hand toward the door of the office.

Hal blinked. "That's it?"

"We really have nothing else to discuss."

"But what about putting the spaceport inspectors on alert?"

Nyroska gave him an oily smile as he came around from behind the desk and rested a hand on the small of Hal's back. "My dear Inspector Horn, our

spaceport inspectors are already on alert. We received a request from Imperial authorities to be on the lookout for Rebel operatives coming here. You witnessed our thoroughness-you fit the profile we were given. As you can imagine, this Imperial matter is consuming much of our time. I will append this Savich woman's name to the detain list, but unless you can link her to the Rebels, she will be a secondary concern."

Hal closed his eyes for a moment and slowly exhaled. The galaxy had turned upside down in recent years, so much so he hardly recognized it. Imperial authorities had become obsessed with the Rebellion and, while folks with Rebel sympathies could be found all over the place, on Corellia very few Rebel agents had been discovered. He'd heard rumors that Garm Bel Iblis had been connected to the Rebellion, but he considered most of the rumors the normal fallout of politics. And with Bel Iblis dead, there's no way he can defend himself against such lies.

Still, those lies had helped brand Hal and every other Corellian as a potential Rebel agent. While the authorities he had come to for help in finding Moranda Savich were checking him out, she could have been dancing onto any number of ships headed for points unknown. Time once was when nabbing someone with her reputation would have made a man like Nyroska jump for joy, but as the Emperor focused more energy on the Rebellion, priorities shifted.

"It would be easy for me to lie to you. Colonel Nyroska, and tell you she is the Rebel agent you're looking for." Hal shook his head slowly. "She isn't-at least, I don't know of any Rebel connections she has."

"Thank you for your honesty. Inspector."

Hal paused in the doorway and arched an eyebrow above a hazel eye at him. "You didn't expect honesty from a Corellian?"

"All I expect of you is respect for our regulations, Inspector." Nyroska shrugged uneasily. "These days I never expect honesty, from anyone."

The Corellian thought for a moment, then nodded. "Have to hope for a return to the old days, then, when those we hunted actually committed crimes. Thanks for your help. I'll let you know when I find her."

Ysanne Isard glared up at Trabler as her aide finally cleared the Immigration checkpoint. "What detained you?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "Profile check, I assume."

She almost snapped that he should not assume anything, but she checked herself. She'd chosen Trabler to accompany her because of his unswerving loyalty to the Empire and because she recalled his wrenching the head off a captive Ithorian with his bare hands. He is here for his muscle, nothing more. He will do what I tell him to do when I tell him to do it. The blond hair and Corellian background of his cover identity likely did trip the Xakrean profiling system. Their tendency toward being overly thorough will only slow us down, which is why I want no official contact with them.

"No matter. They're bringing our landspeeder around. You are confident you can navigate?"

Trabler nodded once. "I studied the local maps and always have my datapad to back things up."

"Good." She led the way to the spaceport exit and found a man standing next to a rental landspeeder.

He bore a sign that read "Glasc," her assumed surname. She and Trabler made their way over to him, identified themselves, and took possession of the vehicle. As Trabler slipped into the driver's seat, she took her place in the back.

Isard powered up her datapad. "I have the files on Xakrea's fringe population and am getting comlinked updates as the locals flag files. Since the Rebel will undoubtedly be taking refuge among the scum here, we will hunt there as well. Our quarry will want to alter his identity, and there are only a few places that offer such services here. We will begin by checking them."

"As you wish. Special Agent Isard."

"There is one address on East Ryloth Street and another on Palpatine Parkway. Which is closer?"

"Ryloth Street should be." Trabler glanced at her in the mirror. "That would be your preference, then?"

"Indeed." She smiled coldly at the reflection of his eyes. "Anyone who would sell him a new identity will sell him to us. Let's go, we have a lot of shopping to do today."

Hal thanked the hovercab driver and Upped him half again the fare he'd been charged. "Really, this is it; 24335 East Ryloth Street, right where I want to be."

The Devaronian looked around at the seedy neighborhood and back at Hal again. "West Ryloth is more your kind of place, my friend."

Hal shook his head and jerked a thumb at the curio shop. "Arky is an old friend." He gave the cabbie a conspiratorial wink. "You never saw me, hey?"

"Got it, pal. Never saw you."

The Corellian exited the cab and slammed the door shut. He watched the cab pull away, then stepped over a midden of litter and made his way straight for the shop's transparisteel door. The lettering painted on the door proclaimed the shop to be Arky's Emporium of Forgotten Treasures; Hal figured most of them were forgotten because they had to be excavated from beneath layers of dust. All the items on display in the viewports were sun faded and cracked, hardly inviting the casual passerby to venture inside.

Not that they get many casual passersby down here, Hal thought. He opened the door and quickly scanned the place. The only other customer glanced quickly in his direction when the door buzzed as Hal opened it, then turned and seemed very interested in not letting Hal get a look at his face. That behavior would have struck Hal as odd, but the customer was likely taking his cue from the way Arky had paled when he recognized Hal.

"Seb Arkos, what a surprise." The Corellian Security Force officer kept his voice light. "Last I recall, you'd won an all-expenses-paid trip to Kessel."

Seb Arkos snorted. He stood as tall as Hal, but had a skeletally thin build that matched the rheumy grumble that underscored his words. "Yeah, well, glitmining isn't my kind of thing. Out of your range, aren't you, CorSec?"

"I'm hurt, Arky. Here I come all this way to see you, and all I get is hostility." Hal strolled through the store, seeing only a collection of junk. He almost remarked

about that fact, but he remembered that his wife had a knack for walking into such a place and rescuing treasures from it. "Dealing in antiques is your sort of thing now, or are those delicate hands still forging the best transport and identification documents in the galaxy?"

Arky's smile betrayed him for a second, then he scowled. "I keep my nose clean."

Hal raised open hands. "Hey, the local snoopers are no friends of mine. "

"But you are looking for a friend?"

"Someone I feel about the same way I feel about you, Arky." Hal slipped a static holograph of Moranda Savich from his pocket and flashed it for the forger. "Moranda Savich. Seen her?"

"Moranda Savich?" The slender man tapped a bony finger against his chin. "Moranda Savich?"

Hal jerked a thumb at the store's other customer. "You want me to start asking your clientele?"

Arky's eyes widened, the pale blue communicating a jolt of fear. "No, no need to do that. I seen her around, you know, places."

"She retaining your services?"

The forger shook his head. "Nope, she hasn't asked me to dummy anything up for her."

Hal caught a hint of deceit from the shopkeeper. "Let's not try to slice the truth too thin here. She's talked to you about smuggling her off this rock, right? And you figured you'd nail her for clean datadocs in the process? "

The cadaverous man's eyes narrowed, and a lank of white hair drifted down over his forehead. "Okay, straight bytes, no bits flipped. We talked. She wants to be gone, and you're the reason. She's getting very insistent."

"And you're going to let me know when you're meeting with her next?"

Arky's head came up. "Look, Horn, you know I don't play that way. You set me up to join Booster and the others on Kessel, but I didn't Vader them out, did I? I was loyal to my mates."

Hal shrugged and folded his arms across his chest. "Fine. I can wait here forever. We'll be business partners, you and I. I'll be your silent partner, checking everyone out, at least until you decide not to be silent."

Arky glowered at him, then swiped a hand under his nose. "Okay, maybe she was going to be around. Soon, maybe."

The CorSec inspector nodded. "Good enough. I can wait."

"Outside, hey?"

Hal glanced from Arky to the other man in the store, then saw a woman approaching the door. "Sure. Looks like it will be crowded in here soon anyway. I'll wait outside. She won't see me and will never know it was you."

Across the street, hidden in the shadows of an alley, Moranda Savich smacked an open hand against the wall. Seb Arkos had been the only shadow broker who had been willing to talk with her. The Imperial interdiction had scared everyone else. Of course, you don't have to be a genius to know a Corellian expatriate wouldn't be smart enough to be afraid of the Imps. The local authorities were ruled and regged up so badly they had to fill out Kbytes of dataforms before they could even draw a blaster. Not so the Imps-rumor has it they get bonus pay for saving the state the cost of a trial.

She wanted to get off Xakrea as fast as possible, and meeting Seb Arkos the previous evening had seemed a fine stroke of luck-luck which has soured. As she headed toward his store to make her arrangements, who should pop out of a hovercab but Hal Horn, as big as life and too damned close for her comfort.

Closest he's gotten so far. A minute later and he would have caught me in that shop. She allowed herself a half smile. Well, not all my luck is bad.

It hadn't taken Moranda long to put together a few puzzle pieces as events unfolded on Xakrea. She'd used her datapad to take a look at the cards she'd lifted, but they were encrypted. While she was no ace slicer, she knew a few

tricks and was able to determine that the files had been coded with some heavy-duty Imperial encryption routines. Given the eight cards in the set, she figured they had to be some fairly extensive military files-military files being the only thing that matched up with the courier's demeanor. The only folks who would want Imp military files would be the Empire's enemies, which meant the Rebellion. The Imperial interdict on the spaceport had a search for Rebels linked to it, confirming her suspicions.

This gave her a brand-new problem, and one that made Hal Horn a decided side issue. Moranda had heard rumors about the Rebellion, passed some on, and marveled at others, but by and large she kept away from being involved. In her line of work the face on the coin really didn't matter much, just the fact that the coin was there and could be lifted. Any government would take a dim view of how she made her living, be it Imperial, local, or whatever these Rebels would put into place. Those folks worry about laws, where I worry about evading them.

Having a datapack chock full of Imperial military secrets could easily be construed by local and Imperial forces as a sign that she was a Rebel. She had no idea if the rumors of what the Imps did with captured Rebels were true or not, but she'd prefer an extended stay on Kessel to what she'd heard about. Keeping the datapack was not a good idea, and she knew it. And, she kept telling herself, she was going to ditch it at the earliest opportunity.

And yet there its weight was, in her jacket pocket, slapping against her hip as she crouched down. Someone, she knew, would pay good money for the cards, and that money would take her places Hal Horn couldn't even begin to dream about finding her. She didn't see hanging on to the datacards as a gamble as much as she did a balance. Right now the risk wasn't too great, but when things got unbalanced, she could ditch the datacards.

Right, that's what I'm going to do.

Her self-mocking smile died as a woman got out of a landspeeder farther up the block. The front registration plate had a rental code on it and looked far too new to be in this part ofXakrea unless it was driven by a booster looking to piece it out for parts. The woman spoke to the driver, then set off down the street, heading for Arky's store.

Though the woman wore civilian clothes, Moranda knew she was Imperial, straight from Imperial Center, and that meant she was most probably Imperial Intelligence. The cut of her clothes marked her point of origin, and the haughty way her chin lifted as she navigated past a derelict glitbiter lying up against a building marked her as Imperial. And she's going straight for Arky, which means Intel, and that means I'm in very deep.

Ysanne Isard wrinkled her nose at the store's thick scent. She ran a finger across a feline statue carved from Ithorian toad wood, then gently brushed her hands against each other to rid her finger of dust. As she did so, she took quick stock of the store and the three men in it. Seb Arkos she recognized from a file on her datapad. The other two men seemed unremarkable until the larger one speaking with Arkos glanced at her.

Horn, from Corellia. CorSec, if the file flashed to me was accurate. It struck her as odd that a man newly arrived on

Xakrea would come so quickly to a known Rebel contact point. Unless, like Bel Iblis, he's a Rebel, too. She frowned. Nothing in Horn's file indicated any Rebel sympathies, and Isard dimly recalled his father being a highly placed member of CorSec, one who had been lauded for his diligence in hunting Jedi.

She turned to examine a filthy Weequay chin-harp, knowing full well it could never function without the matching chord hammer, and raised her comlink to her mouth. In a whisper she commanded Trabler to bring the landspeeder up to the store's door. Through the window she caught a hint of movement as he complied with her order, so she pocketed the comlink and walked smartly over to Hal Horn.

"Inspector Horn? I am Katya Glasc of Darkknell Special Security."

A grin blossomed on Arkos's face. "In trouble, Inspector?"

Horn shook his head. "I shouldn't be. Am I, Agent Glasc?"

Though slightly shorter than Trabler, Horn had a powerful build and a metric ton more intelligence in his hazel eyes than Trabler could ever hope for. He wore his brown hair cut conservatively short, and that revealed the gray hairs growing in at his temples. She guessed he was a half-dozen years older than

she was, and someone who saw himself as a good man. Which means he can be useful or very dangerous.

"That depends. Your identification, please."

Horn carefully drew a datacard from within his jacket, which Isard slipped into her datapad. She glanced at his information and took in the warrants, then nodded and returned the card to him. "I wanted to make certain. Please, forgive the caution. Your investigation, we may have a break in it..."

Her head came up, then she frowned. "Perhaps this is not the place to discuss this sort of thing. If you don't mind, I have a speeder waiting outside..."

Horn watched her carefully. "You've found Savich?"

"We've found evidence of her presence. I would feel more at ease explaining outside." She hooked a hand through his left elbow, letting it rest lightly enough there to be construed as an invitation, not an order.

The Corellian nodded slowly. "Your world, your rules." He turned back and pointed a finger at the shopkeeper. "Don't let me down, Arky."

"Right, Horn." The thin man scoffed loudly. "I'll have her wait right here for you. You bet."

Garm Bel Ibis suppressed a shudder as Isard led Hal Horn out of the shop. Bel Iblis had been so careful in reaching Arkos's store that when Horn walked in, he felt certain he'd been trapped. Arkos had recognized the inspector right off and had muttered, "Emperor's black bones, CorSec, here," under his breath. Bel Iblis had braced himself not to jump when Horn grabbed him, but the man had just passed him by without so much as a glance.

As Horn started in on Arkos, Bel Iblis had begun to relax. He still had no evidence that anyone was looking for him, or that anyone thought he still lived. The anonymity of death gave him a chance to operate without surveillance, but how long it would last he had no idea. He hoped Arkos would provide him with a good set of documents to allow him to continue his search for the thief on Darkknell and, possibly, even act as a broker for any exchange.

It struck Bel Iblis as possible that Horn could be a Rebel operative sent to Darkknell by Bail Organa and Mon Mothma to recover the datapack, since neither of them knew he was alive and out to get it himself. He had no idea if Horn was a Rebel; Bel Iblis admired the efficient cell system that had been set up to deny all but those who needed to know that sort of information. He hesitated, almost prepared to make his identity known to Horn, but the direction of the CorSec agent's questioning of Arkos made him hold back.

The Senator found himself secretly smiling as Horn worked on Arkos. One of the most galling things about being a senator from Corellia was dealing with the reputation his system had for its smugglers. Bel Iblis and the majority of the other Corellians were good people, but they were judged by association with others. While Bel Iblis didn't know Hal Horn, he knew plenty of folks like him, who worked hard to make Corellia a better place. His admiration for Horn's dedication to duty spawned his smile.

The arrival of Ysanne Isard killed that smile again. Bel Iblis had only ever met her once, at an Imperial reception. She had been on her father's arm. Bel Iblis detested Armand Isard. A little man with iron eyes and a wiry speed that made Bel Iblis feel clumsy, Armand Isard had ruthlessly ferreted out and destroyed Rebel cells, both real and imagined. His daughter, with her mismatched eyes of fire and ice, had inherited her father's singleness of purpose and, worse yet, had developed a personal devotion to the Emperor. For her to be on Darkknell meant the original theft had been discovered and that Armand Isard was sparing no effort in getting the datapack back in Imperial hands.

A cold chill sank into the Senator's bones as he realized Armand Isard had undoubtedly given the order that slew his family and almost got him. His hands closed into fists, but he didn't lash out; he didn't smash Ysanne Isard in the face with all his might, though he sorely wanted to. No, even killing her would not hurt her father, and even hurting him is not the focus here. The datapack she's hunting for, that will help bring down the Empire. If we do that, never again will there be a place-or an Armand Isard or Emperor to hurt people.

Gaining control of his anger, Bel Iblis turned to watch the door close behind Isard and Horn. "Well, Arkos, the time we have to complete our business is slipping away. I think we should conclude it before the Emperor himself comes wandering in, don't you?"

Moranda Savich saw the landspeeder cruise down and come to a stop in front of the store and felt as if a hand were tightening around her heart. She'd spent a lot of time doing her best to avoid Imperial scrutiny, but that didn't mean she allowed herself to be ignorant of her enemies. Imperial Intelligence ops, as a rule, cast a wide web when going after a target. The fact that she could see the spider in the center of that web meant that other forces were closing in.

And that means I get caught holding a prize morsel. Again the urge to throw the datapack away nearly overwhelmed her. She reached into her pocket to get it, then noticed the landspeeder's driver's-side window sliding down into the door. The bruiser of a driver glanced around, then looked at himself in the rearview mirror. His vanity, which struck her as very human, brought her out of her panic and sparked a plan.

She pulled the datapack out of her pocket, broke it open, and pulled out the eight datacards. She stacked them one on top of another and laid them against the bottom of her datapad. Straightening up, she tugged her jacket into place, then boldly strode over toward the landspeeder. She consulted the map on her datapad a couple of times, looked around, and let a puzzled expression contort her brow.

She'd closed to within three meters before the driver noticed her, and by then she was flashing her datapad at him. "Excuse me, please. I believe I'm lost. Can you help me, please?"

The man's expression eased. "Yeah, I guess maybe I could."

Moranda leaned over and smiled broadly at him. She took the datapad from her left hand into her right and thrust it into the vehicle, stabbing toward the datapad he had mounted in the dashboard holder. "Our maps look different."

The driver studied her map, then his own, taking her datapad into his hands to do so. Moranda crossed her arms and let the datacards in her left hand slip, one by one, down into the window well of the landspeeder's door. She coughed lightly to cover the minute clicks as they descended, and was pretty certain that the driver would take any sounds he heard to be key clicks from the datapad.

The driver handed her back her datapad. "See, this is East Ryloth Street. Your map was showing West Ryloth Street. You were five kilometers off, that's why you couldn't tell where you were."

"Oh, thank you very much." Moranda studied the datapad, then shook her head and smiled. "I can't tell you what a big help you've been." She backed away from the vehicle and headed off the way she had come, valiantly resisting the urge to burst out laughing. The prize he came here for is now ten centimeters from him and he has no clue.

Unable to help herself, Moranda spun around in midstreet, thinking to thank the man again. As she came around, she looked up and locked eyes with Hal Horn.

Seeing Moranda Savich there, in the middle of the street, capering around in a circle like a child, sent a jolt through Hal Horn. He started to move after her, but the Darkkneel Security woman's hand became a claw on his arm. Moranda had already turned and begun to run when Hal looked at his escort. "She's getting away."

"Trabler," the woman snapped, "get her." The driver's door on the landspeeder in front of the store opened and a huge man piled out. Hal knew he was huge not only because he towered over the roof of the landspeeder, but his massive paw dwarfed the blaster he drew from beneath his jacket. Hal recognized it as a Luxan Penetrator, favored by many because of its concealability and the serious power it packed. Most models didn't even have a stun setting and that, combined with a cool sense of lethality rippling off the man, prompted Hal to act.

He took a second to focus, then used a trick his father had taught him long ago, before the Clone Wars and before the Jedi hunters had come. He pushed his consciousness into Trabler's mind. He saw through Trabler's eyes, watching the Penetrator come up and center itself on Moranda Savich's back. He watched Trabler track her for a second and knew she'd never reach the safety of the alley in time.

Drawing on the Force within himself, he projected a blurred image of Moranda into Trabler's mind.

Trabler's finger tightened on the trigger. A red-gold beam stabbed out and caught Moranda in the shoulder just as she reached the alley. Hal heard her scream and watched her tumble down into a pile of debris. He started to go after her, but Isard held on to him again.

Hal batted her arm away. "What are you doing? She's down, either dead or seriously wounded. I need to check."

The woman's eyes narrowed and though their color did not match, the venom in them did. "We will have the locals find her and bring her to the morgue. We have more important business to attend to."

Hal frowned, wishing he could get a solid read off the woman. His use of the Force had left him a bit drained-- it had been far too long since he had done anything that active, and he was grossly out of practice. As a result, he couldn't even get the menace that had to be roaring off Trabler as the man turned and aimed his blaster at Hal. "What's going on here?"

Glasc's face tightened. "I couldn't tell you in there, but we have a Rebel operative on the loose and I need your help in tracking him."

"Look, you got me out here saying you were helping me with my case, and now your man has killed my suspect. I'm not here to hunt Rebels."

Her chin came up. "But you are loyal to the Empire, are you not?"

"I serve CorSec to maintain order, so, yes, I'm loyal to the Empire."

She let her expression soften and her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "There are members of Darkkneel Special Security who are not, which is why my search is running into trouble. I have to rely on someone from outside my own service-you-to make some headway. I know this is unorthodox, but surely you've resorted to unusual methods to push cases forward before."

"Some, but I don't see that this is any concern of mine, really." Hal shook his head. "My purpose for being here is lying in a heap over there."

"So it might seem, but the Rebel we're after was involved in the assassination of Senator Garm Bel Iblis and his family." The woman's voice became very

solemn. "The speech he was to give that night was one in which he was going to denounce the Rebellion. They murdered him so that wouldn't happen. I thought that you, a Corellian, might want to help us find his killer."

Hal shivered and felt his flesh puckering. As much as he couldn't believe the casual way Trabler had shot Moranda-notothing in her file warranted death as a punishment-the idea of a bomber who killed hundreds of people just to get one man filled him with revulsion. If Bel Iblis's assassin is here, he must be found and brought to justice. Bel Iblis was from Corellia. I owe it to him to help find his killer.

The CorSec inspector nodded. "Okay, I'm in." He leveled a finger at Trabler. "Just no shooting first, okay? If your suspect murdered Bel Iblis, we want him to talk and lead us back to the others involved in the Rebellion, right?"

Glasc nodded, then opened the landspeeder's rear door. "After you, Inspector Horn. With your help, our quarry won't get away."

As the landspeeder sped off, Bel Iblis stumbled from the shop and ran across the street. He'd seen the woman's senseless murder and though he would not have questioned the truth of someone reporting Ysanne Isard had ordered such a thing, to see it unfold before him was another thing entirely. Reaching the alley mouth he saw blood and, just for a moment, he expected to follow the trail and find his wife at the end of it.

No, she's gone. PoorArrianya, you died for a cause you didn't even believe in. Bel Iblis choked back the lump rising in his throat, then looked deeper into the dim alley and saw the woman slumped against a wall. Her right arm hung limply at her side, the sleeve other coat soaked in blood. A cigarra hung from the corner of her mouth, and she kept trying to strike a lighter with her blood slicked left hand.

The woman looked over at him and grinned. "Got a spark, pal?" Then her eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed.

The senator ran to her and knelt at her side. The only virtue of being shot with a Penetrator is that the tiny beam makes a neat hole. Bel Iblis saw a nasty entry wound and a smaller exit on the front side of her shoulder. He stripped off his own coat and wrapped it around the wounds, then lifted her in his arms and started back toward Arkos's store.

It occurred to him that the last woman he had carried in his arms like this had been his wife, on an anniversary getaway several years earlier. It had been a wonderful time, an escape from the pressures of his office and her duties, and they had both told each other that they would do it again, soon. Very soon.

Bel Iblis's expression hardened. I lost her to the Empire; I'm not losing anyone else. He knew, given the course the Rebellion would likely take, that resolution would never hold. Well, at least I won't lose this woman. It's not saving the galaxy, but it's saving the part of it I can, and that works for now.

He looked up as Arkos held the shop's door open. "We need to get her some medical help-now. That woman was Ysanne Isard, late of Imperial Center and employed by Imperial Intelligence."

"If she's here..." Terror choked off Arkos's voice.

The senator put steel into his voice. "Hang with me, Arkos. She's not invincible-she walked right past me, remember, and snagged someone who's got nothing to do with our business. Keep your head and we'll all keep ours."

Arkos thought for a moment, then nodded quickly. "You're right. Thanks."

"Not a problem. Let's get things going." Bel Iblis smiled. "There will come a point when Isard realizes she needs to come back here and complete her business with you. By then I want everything we need to do done, and the only thing left for her here is our laughter at her blunder."

Hal Horn's afternoon sojourn with Agent Glasc and her aide, Trabler, made one thing abundantly clear to him. These two, as efficient as they might be as investigators, were not part of Darkkneel Special Security, not even whatever they might call their internal investigations bureau. They have all the arrogance I'd expect from the Isk-isk division, but it's usually only displayed to Huttled-up cops, not civilians.

Glasc had moved Hal from location to location, proclaiming each to be a suspected Rebel contact site. Most were sleazy little holes like Arky's store, but a couple had been more upscale and toward the west side of Xakrea. The

gourmet caf shop where Hal and Trabler waited outside on either side of the door was one of the more prosperous places. Hal had enjoyed the rich aroma of the small shop, and had reluctantly agreed to wait outside as the owner took Glasc into her private office to discuss things.

Hal arched an eyebrow at Trabler. "Hard to believe the owner didn't think we'd fit in with the clientele."

The bigger man frowned, causing his blond brows to kiss each other above his nose. "You think we look like Rebels?"

Hostility poured through Trabler's voice and Hal was perfectly glad his Force senses were a bit tired, since it saved him the full force of the anger rolling off the guy. "Easy, my friend, I didn't mean to suggest that at all. You know as well as I do that the Rebel tag on this place was likely snatched by the other caf shop around the corner. Customers here seem a bit too prosperous to be Rebels."

"Think so, do you?" Trabler snorted coldly. "You'd be surprised at how highly some Rebels are placed. Then again, maybe you wouldn't."

"And that's supposed to mean?"

"Means one can't be too sure who's gone over or not." Trabler half smiled. "The Core Worlds have their share of Rebels, sure, but rimkin have more."

"Interesting point." Hal let a pair of women exiting the shop shield him from Trabler. The last time Hal had heard the word "rimkin" used, he had broken up a fight in a Corellian tapcafe where a local had beaten someone from Imperial Center to a pulp for applying such an insulting term to him. Not too many rim-dwellers apply that word to themselves.

The door opened again and Agent Glasc appeared. She was daubing a white handkerchief against a dark spot on her gray blouse. "She was useless. Broke down and blubbered about evading taxes, but she knows nothing about the Rebellion. Or the plot against Bel Iblis."

Trabler glanced at his datapad, then pointed on down the street. "Continuum Void is next on the list. It's that way."

Hal took the lead and found Glasc quickly pacing beside him. "The owner didn't react to any of the holographs you showed her?"

Glasc shook her head. "Ignorant, completely ignorant, as was her staff. Places like this claim to bring the latest in Imperial culture to Darkknell, but it's only what they imagine really goes on at the heart of the Empire. I mean, Corellia is a Core World-did you think the Corellian blend car was the sort of thing you'd drink at home?"

"Well, no, but that's because at CorSec we brew it strong enough to be used for medicinal purposes." Hal shrugged. "When doing a rimstint I try not to let the indigs and their ways get to me, you know?"

"You're very charitable, Inspector Horn."

Hal smiled. "I try to be." The fact that Glasc didn't react at all when he referred to the citizens of Darkknell as "indigs" or his time on the world as a "rimstint," told him very clearly she wasn't the local she was purporting to be. A local could no more have failed to react than Moranda could give up her cigarras. Something is not right here, and I'm not looking forward to finding out how wrong it's become.

Trabler moved ahead and opened the door to the crowded tapcaf. Hal descended the trio of steps to the serving floor, then worked his way around past a table of boisterous Devaronians. He wanted to reach the bar before Glasc did. He managed to delay her by tapping a Devaronian on the shoulder. As the man swung his head around to see who had touched him, a horn snagged Glasc's uniform tunic, slowing her down.

Hal spotted a small man wearing a name tag that proclaimed him to be the manager and moved to intercept him before the guy could head through a doorway leading into an office marked "Private."

"I'm Inspector Horn; these are Agents Glasc and Trabler. We have some questions for you. Do you want to answer them now, or after we lock this place down and have it searched for contraband?"

The little man gulped air audibly, and coughed half of it back up. "I don't want trouble."

Hal half turned toward Glasc. Her glare had only been partially melted by the way he'd braced the man. "Agent Glasc here has some holographs for you to look at." Hal held his hand out, and she gave them to him, then he fanned them in front of the manager. "Recognize anyone?"

The man gave them a cursory glance. "No, I don't think I do."

Hal settled his left hand on the man's right shoulder. "Look, pal, I'm just trying to give you a chance to help yourself here. The surveillance team we've got on this place has pointed out to us which of these guys has actually been through here. Now you confirm their information and answer more questions, or we send you away for obstructing justice. We can still send him to Kessel for that, right. Agent Glasc?"

Glasc nodded, her expression getting cold. "For a longtime."

The little man shivered. "Kessel? I don't even know what that is."

"And that's the way you want to keep it, friend. Look at the holographs again, closely."

The man did, running a finger across the surface of each. The manager didn't let recognition flash through his eyes on any of them". Even so, with his hand on the man's shoulder, Hal could feel the tiny twitches of shoulder muscle that marked each pause over an image. Three of the five guys had actually been in the place, but the longest pause had come over the center picture, the one of the short blond guy with a military-style haircut.

The manager blinked. "I'm not sure."

"Let me help you." Hal shuffled the blond's picture to the top of the pack, then plucked it off the top and smacked it against the man's forehead. He did so with a bit more gusto than he wanted to, but the fact that the man's head bumped against the wall eased Glasc's scowl and, after all, Hal was playing more to appease her than anything else.

"This guy was in here and you remember him. How recently?"

"Um, um, yesterday maybe, no, wait, this morning. Early. Only the habitués in that early, you know?" The manager aped Hal's growing smile. "He was waiting for someone, but then he burst into flames."

Glasc pounced on that remark. "Burst into flames?"

The manager winced at the sharp tone in her voice. "Well, he was sitting there, then this woman with a drink and cigarra tripped and spilled the drink on him. Cigarra caught it on fire, I guess. She helped him put it out and he was okay."

Hal gave the man's shoulder a squeeze. "Great, and what else do you remember?"

"Well, when the guy he was waiting for showed, they talked and the blond guy there, he got agitated. He said he'd been robbed, then he took off like he'd stolen Vader's cloak, you know?"

Glasc narrowed her eyes and glanced at Hal. "Whatever he had was lifted, you figure? The woman who set him on fire must have it. What did she look like?"

The pink tip of the manager's tongue wormed its way over dry lips. "Well, she wasn't that tall, and she had brown hair...."

Hal shook his head. "This is ridiculous. I have a holograph for you to look at." He reached into his pocket and slipped a holograph from his wallet, then pulled it out. He ripped the blond man's holograph from the manager's forehead and tossed it to Glasc, then showed the other holo to the manager. "Was this her?"

The manager shook his head. "Never seen her before in my life."

I should hope not. My wife wouldn't be caught dead in a place like this. Hal shrugged and slipped the holograph back into his pocket. "Thank you for your help. You're free to go."

The man scurried off as Glasc grabbed Hal's shoulder and spun him toward her. "What do you mean dismissing him?"

"Forgive me for preempting your investigation, but you know this lead was a complete bust. We're looking for the person who killed Bel Iblis, right? Well,

what assassin sits around in some dump tapcaf like a jewel thief waiting for a fence? I've no doubt your pretty boy there is guilty of something, but he was a rank amateur if he got lifted the way he did. And a lifter that good has likely already put plenty of hyperspace between her butt and this rock."

Trabler frowned. "The assassin was waiting to get paid."

Hal rolled his eyes. "Then what was lifted? Proof he'd killed Bel Iblis? I would have thought the galaxywide broadcast of the state funeral on Corellia would have pretty much been taken as proof. Moreover, an assassin that good would have demanded at least partial payment up front, so he'd never have to dive to these depths again. We should be looking on some luxury resort world, not here."

Hal watched Glasc and saw her eyes flicker back and forth for a moment. He expected panic to roll less-than off her, but he caught none of it. Which means my Force reserves are absolutely gone, or she's just that good at self-control. Her whole cover story, thought up on the fly as Trabler shot Moranda down, was falling apart, and Trabler's spackle job had only pointed out how absurd it had been from the start. Whatever they were really here searching for had been brought to Darkknell by the blond and lifted by Moranda. The fact that these two reeked of Core World arrogance suggested to Hal that they were most likely Imperials.

Hal shook his head. And that means both Moranda - com if she's even alive- and I are in far deeper than we ever wanted to be.

Garm Bel Iblis looked around the threadbare apartment as Moranda gingerly shrugged on a new blouse and jacket. Her living quarters were little more than a box with a window and a small refresher station walled away toward the rear, right beside the closet in which she rooted about for clothes. He didn't see much there that made him think this was a place she'd lived long-term-- and before congratulating himself on his deductive ability, he did recall that a CorSec inspector had come looking for her, which meant she'd been on the run.

The room, he thus decided, was one of those places that was the underworld's equivalent of a safe house. Governments used safe houses as places where they could hide a witness before a trial or house a spy during debriefing. There were little bits and pieces of stuff here-mismatched glowlamps, a half-dozen

periodical datacards, a melange of sheets and blankets that covered a thin pad laid down out of sight of the window-- that had probably been left behind by previous criminal tenants.

Now that I'm full into the Rebellion, I guess this will be the sort of place I'll be spending my time in, too.

"The place isn't much, I know. Neither am I." Moranda emerged from the closet wearing a vibrant blue tunic and a dark brown coat over it. She eased her right shoulder around in a tiny circle and almost totally suppressed the grimace that resulted. "There, good as new."

"A bacta bath would make you good as new."

"True, but the shot mostly just roasted meat-lots of aches but no breaks. Besides those Emdee droids have a nasty habit of reporting blaster burns to the authorities." Moranda eyed him closely. "Seeing as how you're a Rebel, I don't think you'd want that sort of scrutiny."

Bel Iblis stiffened, quite involuntarily, then narrowed his eyes. "How did you guess?"

"No guess about it." She tapped a finger against her temple. "First, you cared to come find me, and it wasn't to pick over my bones. Compassion is rare these days and the Rebels seem to have a lock on it. Second, you came even though you were smart enough to know the folks who shot me were probably Imperial Intelligence."

Bel Iblis nodded. "The woman was Ysanne Isard, Ar mand Isard's daughter."

Moranda's eyes grew wide at that, then she shivered. "I knew this was tricky business, but just how tricky..."

"What else made you think I'm a Rebel?"

"Arky has a rep. You're clearly a Corellian and all Corellians hate taking orders. The patch job you did on me suggests you've done your time in the military, which helps breed loyalty to the way it was before Palpatine got greedy. Finally, if the Imps are sniffing around for something, the folks opposing them are likely to be Rebels."

"Really?" Bel Iblis let the question linger for a moment. "Perhaps I'm Black Sun."

"Ha! There's that compassion thing, remember?"

"Hmmm, good point." Bel Iblis thought for a moment. "What makes you think the Imps are sniffing around for some thing and not some one?"

"Well, I could tell you I deduced that from the fact that Iceheart's daughter is here. For wet work they'd just send out a bunch of her drivers. She's presumably got brains, so they must want to ask questions before they shoot."

"Save in your case."

"Hey, that's a better shot than he got in." Moranda gave Bel Iblis a lopsided smile. "Fact is, I lifted something from a nervous young man here and it has Imperial property-important Imperial property-coded all over it. That was what you were sent to pick up, wasn't it?"

Bel Iblis shrugged as casually as he could manage. "Can you prove you were the thief?"

She nodded and pulled a black scarf from the pocket of her jacket. "The packet I exchanged for the one I stole had the mate of this tying it up all nice and pretty. Recognize it?"

He reached out and ran a thumb over the material. "Where's the package now?"

She laughed. "Not so fast, Reb. I'm grateful for the patch on my arm, but I'd like the resources to leave this mudball and get far away from Hal Horn. What's it worth to you?"

"Twenty-five thousand credits."

"How about fifty?"

"Sold."

Moranda's eyes widened again. "That valuable, eh? Can we work some bonus pay in here, too?"

"Where is it?"

She hissed and Bel Iblis felt his heart tighten. "In a very safe place."

"And that would be?"

"The reason I want to know about bonus pay." She shook her head. "I slipped the datacards into the door of Isard's rental speeder. I can see that surprises you, but don't worry. Challenges like that, they always bring out the best in me."

Hal sat alone in the back of the speeder as Glasc drove them to her operational center. Back at the Continuum Void she'd pulled Trabler aside and given him orders that sent him off on his own. She told Hal that Trabler was going to head to the spaceport to check on how things were running there, but he doubted she was telling the truth. Any information Trabler could learn in person could just as easily have been given to her over a comlink.

Hal paid little attention to the world passing in a blurred palette outside the speeder's viewports. He found himself wondering what had prompted him to show the tapcafe's day manager the holo of his wife instead of Moranda's holo. I recognized Moranda from the description the second he started in on it- the cigarra used to roast the blond was a giveaway-but why did I protect her? Now I know she's involved, and that kills the assassin story dead. We have a simple lift from a thief here, but the presence of Imps suggests it's not that simple at all.

By not showing the man the correct holo, Hal had killed the only solid investigative lead Glasc had. He assumed, because she was an Imp, and because she questioned his loyalty right up front, the quarry she was after was connected to the Rebellion somehow. Hal Horn had no love for the Rebels- they put themselves on the wrong side of the law and that was enough to earn his opposition-but he wasn't much crazier about the Imps. More than once he'd tried to rein in the excesses of overzealous Imperial operatives, which generally resulted in his having to clean up after them.

Trabler's actions were a perfect example of the sort of excesses he wanted to avoid. He could have easily run after Moranda and grabbed her. Instead he gave no warning, he just drew his blaster and shot. Hal hoped his messing with Trabler's aim prevented Moranda's death, but he pretty much assumed she was either dead, dying, or severely incapacitated.

Trabler's willingness to shoot to kill someone who, while not innocent, clearly was a bystander in the whole situation, told Hal that the Empire wasn't looking to take any prisoners. Whatever Moranda had lifted had to be very important-covering state secrets, no doubt. And if I know that much, I have to assume my life may be forfeit at some point-whenver I've exceeded my usefulness, or I become enough of an annoyance.

That realization didn't bring with it panic. Yes, Hal felt worried and hated the idea of never seeing his wife or son again, but a sense of calm overrode his emotions. He remembered back to when he was very young, not more than six, and had thrown a temper tantrum over a toy that had been broken. His father took him back out into the yard and told him that he couldn't let his emotions run wild that way, that it disturbed the universe. His father began to teach him simple exercises to calm himself and drilled Hal until they became second nature.

Calm, he could think, and he did so as Glasc slid the speeder to a halt before the door of a small house. Shrubbery screened it from the other nearby houses. An alley ran up the left side and seemed to connect via a gate to an alley or street at the back of the property. The place immediately registered to Hal as a safe house, and while he could imagine someone with Darkknell Special Security using one for her headquarters, the isolated nature of the building-despite its being in the city-- made him uneasy.

Glasc unlocked the door and entered first, then shut the door and headed down a narrow corridor through the kitchen toward an extension that jutted out from the rear of the house. "This way; my office is back here."

Hal followed closely on her heels. She turned to say something to him as they moved into the kitchen, but her attempt to rivet his attention to her did not completely work. A half second before Trabler emerged from behind a door and dropped his hands on the back of Hal's neck, Hal sensed his presence and acted.

Hal fell to his knees and curled his body forward, forcing Trabler to bend over to maintain his grip. As the Imperial op tightened his hands, Hal straightened up and came up on one knee. He drove the back of his head into Trabler's face, producing all sorts of snapping sounds that he was pretty sure were not his skull. Trabler yelped and released him, raising his hands to cover his shattered face. Hal twisted to the right, scything his right leg back through Trabler's ankles. The big man staggered, overturning a table, then crashed down.

Hal snaked a hand inside Trabler's jacket and drew the guard's Luxan Penetrator. He snapped the safety switch off with his thumb and triggered a quick shot at Glasc. She ducked back with blaster in hand, firing a shot that shattered a plate on a shelf just past Hal's head. Hal dove to his right and came up in a crouch. Behind him Trabler, whose face was a mask of blood, had drawn a vibroblade from his boot and was scrambling to his feet. Hal drilled him dead center, burning out his heart, then ducked back where the food storage unit could give him cover.

Glasc triggered a shot that punched through the storage unit. "That won't protect you."

"Didn't figure it would." Hal fished the holo of Moranda from his pocket and tossed it into the middle of the floor. He let Glasc see it, then he fired a shot that melted it into a burning black bubble. "That will."

"What are you talking about?"

"You Intel types always think you're on top of the game, but I make my living sorting truth from lies, and I've sorted enough here to know that you're here looking for something a Rebel op stole. He was the blond, and a lifter took whatever he was carrying. She has it now, and that was the holo other."

"And you think that because you've destroyed that holo that I'll have to keep you alive to identify her?" Glasc's laughter filled the kitchen. "The warrants you brought here to Darkknell for her arrest will yield another holo of her." She punctuated her comment with another shot that spattered hot metal over Hal's jacket.

"Moranda Savich is a master of disguise, so you won't find her. More important, though, your man Trabler probably killed her. I'd guess that part of the task you sent him off on was to find out if the local police or hospitals had

reported her being recovered, right? They didn't, which means she's out there and probably has help."

"And this will keep you alive why?"

"Because I know her. I've tracked her across a half dozen worlds. I know how she operates; I know what she looks like in myriad disguises. Without me you'll never find her-or, if you do, it won't be in time." He stressed the last word to put pressure on the agent, since the desperate measures already employed told him time was of the essence in the recovery of whatever Moranda had stolen. "Give her a chance to catch her breath, and she'll have the prize sold to the Rebels."

"I don't know that I can trust you to help me."

"Ah, excuse me, but I'm the one here who has trust problems, given that your aide tried to tear my head off." Hal shook his head. "Pare-Imp-noiaff" Just never seems to stop. "Believe it or not, I actually want to catch Moranda. You're my best bet for doing that. The alternative is for me to shoot you dead and hope I can evade an Imperial murder warrant. I help you, you say Trabler's weapon discharged accidentally, and we're both in the clear."

"You're right, of course. You could never escape a warrant for my murder." A very confident note entered her voice and sent chills down Hal's spine. "I am Ysanne Isard, the daughter of the director of Imperial Intelligence. You would be hunted forever and your family would disappear."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance." Hal sighed as quietly as he could. It couldn't get much worse, could it?

"And you are correct. I am here hunting a Rebel courier. He stole..."

"Don't tell me; I don't want to know. If you told me you'd have to kill me." Hal closed his eyes for a moment. "I'm here to catch a thief, and that thief has your property. I get her, you get it, I don't need to know what it is."

"Very good, very smart of you." She hesitated for a moment and Hal wanted to cringe for reasons he could not identify. "I am almost inclined to trust you, but because I don't have a full security profile on you, I will demand one condition to our alliance."

"That being?"

A thin, black, ribbonlike device rolled across the floor and unfolded as it came to rest on its side. It looked like a tiny belt with a black clasp, and Hal recognized it immediately as choke-collar. When snapped around his neck it could be given a remote command to constrict, cutting off the bloodflow to his brain, rendering him unconscious. They were often used to restrain prisoners on work details. A constriction override command pulsed out from a central control unit, so the collar constricted when prisoners moved out of range and put a quick end to escapes.

Hal picked it up and let it dangle from one hand. "You'll have the control unit and it will be a deadman device?"

"If I give a command or my pulse stops, the collar constricts. Without a key, or without trusting someone to shoot it off your neck, you'll be dead shortly after I am."

Hal didn't want to put the collar on, but shooting her and then living a life on the run seemed to be his only alternative. "A lightsaber ought to be able to cut through this."

"Perhaps, but the Jedi are all gone. The age of Imperial Justice is here, Hal Horn."

"Of that I'm well aware." Hal slipped the collar on, snapped it closed, then raised the collar on his shirt to hide it. He tossed out the Penetrator and slowly stood. "Here I am, at your service."

Isard appeared and flashed him a quick glimpse of the control device, then bolstered her blaster. "We resume our search at the place I first met you."

"Don't bother. Arky will be long gone. He knew you were Imp Intel long before I did." Hal smiled. "Back to the Continuum Void. It's the only place that stocked Gralish liqueur and Moranda's a fiend for it. Having been shot the way she was, she'll be wanting some fortification. That's the best place to begin."

"What are you talking about?" Isard demanded, the already wintry tone of her voice dropping into subzero territory as she leaned a few centimeters further over the Continuum Void's bar. "He was here two hours ago. Where in this vat of rimspit could he have gone?"

"I don't know. Agent Glasc," the nervous-looking De varonian standing on the far side of the bar stammered, twitching his way backward the same few centimeters Is ard had moved forward. "As the Emperor himself is my witness, I truly do not know. All I can tell you is that he received a call half an hour ago, told me to handle the bar for the rest of the day, and then took off like Vader himself was after him. That's all I know. I swear."

"It probably is," Hal murmured from Isard's side, all his senses focused on the Devaronian. The species was easy enough to read if you knew what to look for. Hal did. "Offhand I'd say our quarry's been busy cleaning up a few loose ends."

"He has no idea what a loose end really is," Isard said acidly, her smoldering eyes still pinning the hapless bar - man to the wall. But there was a subtle change in her tone, enough for Hal to recognize that the focus of her anger had shifted from the Devaronian to Moranda. To Moranda, and her as-yet-unidentified accomplice.

And that one was starting to worry Hal a little. Fine if it was some fellow criminal, either an old friend or a new acquaintance-dangerous enough, but at least fringe types were a relatively known psychological type. But under the circumstances, her ally could instead be a member of the Rebellion.

And that was another vat of vinks alt. As the late and unlamented Trabler had pointed out, Rebels came in all sizes and shapes, with profiles that ranged from opportunistic to fanatical. Fringe criminals generally avoided killing law enforcement officials unless absolutely necessary, if only because it drew too much attention their direction. All too often, in contrast, fanatics, reveled in both the violence and the notoriety.

Bad enough if some loose-laser Rebel shot him through the back for no reason.

Worse if a Rebel shot Isard instead, and her dead body was the last thing Hal wound up seeing as her choke-collar squeezed the life out of him.

"Fine," Isard said, interrupting Hal's increasingly unpleasant line of thought as she straightened back up from her interrogator's lean. "If she spun him a story that he fell for that easily, it almost certainly had something to do with a relative or friend. I want their names. All of them. Now."

The Devaronian gulped. "I-of course. Let me get his profile chart."

Sidling down the bar, he escaped into the manager's office. "Waste of time," Hal murmured, turning around to lean his shoulder blades against the bar as he glanced over the handful of patrons. A mixture of simple workers and less simple fringe types, he decided, fairly typical of places like this. "Even if we find him, and even if he got a good look at Moranda, she's had more than enough time to change her appearance by now."

"The fact she and Arkos thought the manager important enough to chase out of town implies they're reasonably concerned about it," Isard pointed out.

"Possibly," Hal said. "Except that I don't think it's Arkos who's running around with her."

"Why not?" Isard argued. "He was right there at the scene. Probably even saw Trabler shoot her."

"Which is exactly why it wasn't him," Hal said. "I know Arkos, and he's emphatically not the type to get mixed up with a shooting. At least not without some serious pushing from someone else."

Isard grunted. "Fine; so she's picked up someone else. The point is that in setting up this wild skipper hunt they had to come at least part of the way out of the sideboards. If we can chase down the manager and backtrack the story they spun for him, we might be able to get another vector on them."

"I see," Hal murmured, throwing a sideways look at Isard's profile. It was a reasonable approach, all right, classic in its straightforwardness.

Unfortunately, it also required a data-sifting team that would stretch halfway to Coruscant to pull it off. If she really had that much manpower here to draw on...

"Don't worry, we're not going to do it all ourselves," Isard continued, not bothering to look at him. Apparently, she was no slouch at reading people's expressions, either. "There's an Intelligence quiet-drop tucked away in one of the better parts of town where I can tap into Darkknell Security's computers. A few properly placed orders, and the locals will have the manager's complete list of acquaintances tracked down by nightfall."

"Um," Hal said, thinking back to his own earlier interactions with Darkknell officialdom. "You'd better hope they don't tumble to what you're doing," he warned her mildly. "Colonel Nyroska, for one, struck me as something of a stickler for proper protocol. Forged orders don't exactly come under that heading."

"Colonel Nyroska will do what he's told," Isard said coldly, dismissing Nyroska with the flick of an eyelash. "That goes for the rest of this rabble, too."

And for me, too, I suppose? Hal added silently, feeling with fresh awareness and fresh resentment the soft pressure of the choke-collar against his throat. A rhetorical question-of course it went for him, too. He was just one more of her tools, after all, like Darkknell Security and Trabler and probably dozens of others whose broken lives lay scattered about in the dust of her wake. Maybe even hundreds, if the whispered stories about Armand Isard and his ambitious daughter were to be believed.

He eyed her profile again. Yes, he was a tool. But then, so was a lightsaber; and many was the overconfident would-be Jedi impersonator who had carelessly sliced off one of his own major limbs. Sometimes mishandled tools could be very dangerous.

Something to keep in mind.

The small man Moranda had pointed out heaved his travel bag into the transport's cargo area and then climbed into the passenger compartment, a vague sense of discomfort evident in the twitchiness of his movements.

"He's getting aboard," Bel Iblis announced, lowering his macrobinoculars as a fresh twinge of guilt tugged at him. "Though what he's going to think when he gets to Raykel-was

"Keep watching the transport," Moranda interrupted him, her voice sounding distracted. "Make sure he's still aboard when it leaves. Anyway, what's the problem? He ought to be relieved when he finds out his father wasn't actually in any accident."

"I suppose so," Bel Iblis said, throwing a scowl at her. Seated at the apartment's battered dining table, frowning at a datapad, she was unfortunately oblivious to scowls at the moment. "On the other hand, this wild skipper hunt isn't going to come cheap for him."

"Life never has been fair," she said. "If you're worried about it, have your Rebel friends reimburse him."

Bel Iblis snorted. "The Rebellion is hardly a bottomless money pit-was

"The transport, Garm," she said, jabbing a finger toward the window without looking up. "Watch the transport."

Swallowing back a curse, Bel Iblis turned to the window and raised the macrobinoculars again. Over the past few days he'd managed to force back the sharp agony of his family's deaths into a duller ache, a quiet pain that colored every waking minute but which at least left him able to function reasonably well.

But "reasonably well" didn't mean there wasn't an edge of impatience and bitterness to his attitude, an edge this casually arrogant little thief forever seemed to be stepping on. It was a constant battle to keep from blowing up in her face over what under normal circumstances he would have shrugged off as minor personality conflicts.

But it was an effort he had to make. An effort he forced himself to make. He needed her help to retrieve that datapack, to get this vital information that could conceivably make or break the Rebellion. And besides, his black mood wasn't her fault.

Three blocks away, the transport shuddered into motion and lumbered its way down the street. "There it goes," he announced to Moranda, turning back to her again. "And he didn't get off."

"Good," she said, setting aside her datapad with an air of satisfaction, taking a draw on her cigarra, and pulling out her comlink. "He wouldn't have been much use to your friend Isard anyway, but this should give her people something to do while we stir the kettle a bit."

"Which means what?"

"Which means it's time to give the law a call," she said. "I've pulled a likely name off your pal Arkos's private list of incorruptible enforcement types. Let's hope he's also got the smarts to jump the direction we want him to."

She keyed the comlink and held it up. There was a moment's pause—"ationyroska," a crisp voice came from the instrument.

"Hello, Colonel," Moranda said. "You don't know me, but I have a small problem here and I thought you might be able to help."

Nyroska's sigh was just barely audible. "If you'll call your local Security office—was

"I have in my possession a very valuable and politically explosive item," Moranda interrupted him. "An item the Imperial Intelligence officer currently nosing around town very badly wants."

There was the briefest pause. "You're misinformed," Nyroska said. "There are no Imperial Intelligence agents on Darkknell."

"Let's not play games. Colonel," Moranda said, putting some huffiness into her voice. "You and I both know she's here. Frankly, she's pretty hard not to spot, what with that blond muscle-type and his Luxan Penetrator running interference for her. She's all over Xakrea, shaking the trees for a wayward Imperial datapack."

"I see," Nyroska said. His tone was studiously neutral, but Bel Iblis could hear the growing interest beneath it. "I take it the datapack is the valuable item you spoke of?"

"It is, indeed," Moranda confirmed. "Under normal circumstances, I'd get in touch with her directly to work out an exchange. Two problems: I don't have her comlink frequency, and I don't like the idea of Blondie and his Luxan

lurking around the background. So I'd prefer to work the exchange through you. "

"I don't know anything about Imperial agents on Darkkneel," Nyroska said, his voice hardening. "But if you're in possession of stolen or misappropriated goods, the smartest thing you can do is bring everything to Defense Agency headquarters and turn it in."

"Okay by me," Moranda said. "You'll have the million ready?"

"The what?"

"The million," Moranda repeated. "That's in Imperial currency, by the way, not the local stuff."

"You must be joking," Nyroska said stiffly.

"Do you hear me laughing?" Moranda countered. "Trust me. Colonel, a million doesn't even begin to mark what this is worth. The Imps will be willing to buy it from you for two million. The Rebellion, if you can find them, will probably pay three. But don't take my word for it-talk to the Imp and see what she says. Of course, if you turn all this over to her she'll probably cut you out of the profits; but hey, virtue is its own comfort, right?"

"And what makes you think an Imperial Intel agent won't just laugh in my face? Assuming she's not just a figment of your imagination."

"Oh, she's here," Moranda assured him. "And she won't be laughing. Believe me."

Another pause. "All right, I'll make some inquiries and see what I can find out. How do I get in touch with you?"

"I'll call you," Moranda told him. "Remember: one million even. Just pass on that message, and then if you want you can be out of it."

She clicked off. "Now what?" Bel Iblis asked.

"Like I said, we hope he's smart," she said, getting up from the table and putting away both her comlink and datapad. "And on the assumption that he is, we vacate the premises. Now."

For a moment Nyroska glared at the dead comlink. Just pass on that message, the words echoed in his ears, and then you can be out of it. "Not likely," he murmured to himself. "Not very likely."

He looked across the room at his aide. "Lieutenant?"

"Got it. Colonel," Lieutenant Barclo reported briskly. "It came from one of the apartments in the Karflian Nestling block-fringe and lower-class mix, northern end of town. I've got an airspeeder squad on its way."

"Send two more squads in as backup," Nyroska ordered. "Then check and see if we've got Imperial Intel operating on Darkknell at the moment."

"I'm sure we'd have heard if anyone declared him or herself. Colonel."

"We certainly should have," Nyroska agreed grimly. "As I said: check."

"Yes, sir."

Nyroska set down his comlink and swiveled his chair toward the large holo map of the city behind him. If there was a foreign operative running through his city behind his back, he wanted to know about it.

And if said agent was chasing down something worth a million or more in Imperial currency, he most definitely wanted to know about it. less-than

Accessing the spaceport's database, he pulled up the recent arrivals section and keyed for a search.

The manager's profile chart was short. Amazingly short. Suspiciously short.

"Sad, isn't it," Isard said contemptuously as Hal finished scanning through it.

"And they always think they're not blindingly obvious to us."

"They do indeed," Hal agreed, handing back the datapad. The "personal" section of the manager's profile had exactly twelve names in it: parents, one brother, and nine friends. There were Corellian fungal colonies that had longer associates lists than that. "Still, just because he's gimmicking his associates list doesn't mean he has any particular involvement with Moranda."

"He's fringe," Isard said flatly. "That list practically screams it. And fringe types always stick together when the crunch begins." She considered. "Not when we start tightening down, mind you, when they start having sprint races to see who can crumble on each other the fastest. But up until then they stick together."

"Perhaps," Hal murmured, his gaze drifting to the city's northern skyline. The single red-and-white airspeeder he'd spotted a moment ago had now been joined by two others, all of them scooting like their tails were on fire. Markings were impossible to see at this distance, but he'd seen airspeeders with that color scheme parked outside Colonel Nyroska's office. "I presume we start with the family?"

"Since his truly close friends-assuming he's got any-are undoubtedly not on that list, I'd say so," Isard said acidly. "Unless they're phonies, too. What do you think they're up to?"

"Who?"

Isard gestured with her datapad. "Those three Dark knell Defense airspeeders," she said. "Don't try to tell me you hadn't noticed them."

"I noticed them," Hal confirmed calmly. "You think they've got a line on your Rebel?"

"Can't think what else they'd be using Defense personnel for," Isard murmured, her mismatched eyes gazing thoughtfully at the now descending airspeeders. "Well, if they have, we can pull it out of their computer records at the quiet-drop."

"We heading there now?"

"Soon enough," Isard said, holding up the datapad. "I see a name on this profile that was also on Arkos's frequent-customer list. Let's go see if perhaps he hasn't had the sense to vanish like everyone else."

"Thank you for getting back to me so quickly," Nyroska said into his comlink, glancing over the device at Barclo and giving him a sharp nod. Barclo nodded back and busied himself with the trace board.

"Not a problem," the woman's voice came back. "You ready to believe me yet about the Imp agent?"

"Possibly," Nyroska said. "We don't have your agent, but we do have a large blond human male in a tank down at the morgue. The analysts tell me he was shot at close range with a Luxan Penetrator."

There was a brief pause at the other end. "Interesting."

"So you didn't know he was dead?" Nyroska probed.

"Are you suggesting I had something to do with it?" she shot back.

"No, of course not," Nyroska said soothingly. Which was, in point of fact, a true statement. He'd made a career of reading people's faces and voices, and that brief pause had been all the reaction he needed to know the news had indeed taken her by surprise.

Which meant that while she might be a thief, she was not likely to be a murderer. A point in her favor. "I merely brought it up to let you know that that part of your story checks out."

"I'm happy about it if you are," she said, with just a trace of sarcasm. "But until and unless you get to the Imp agent herself, we're no further along than when we started."

"Not necessarily," Nyroska said. "Now that I know that your story has some actual substance to it, I can hopefully persuade my superiors to take the matter seriously."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'd like to meet with you," he said. "No obligations or promises, except of course that I won't try to arrest you or take the merchandise. For now I just want to talk."

"Yeah, right," the woman sniffed. "All completely clear and aboveboard."

"Exactly," Nyroska said, turning up the calm trustworthiness in his voice to full power. "You have to realize you're in a seriously untenable position, especially with a dead body in the morgue that the Intel agent might well believe is your doing. I may be the only one who can help you. And you can check with your fringe friends that I keep my word."

There was another long pause. "I'll think about it," the woman said at last. "I'll call you later."

The connection clicked off. "Barclo?"

"She's moved south to the edge of Little Duros," the lieutenant reported. "I've got three airspeeders on the way."

Nyroska nodded. "A waste of time, probably."

"She does seem to be pretty good at slipping out of comnets," Barclo conceded. "So what now? Wait until she calls again?"

"More or less," Nyroska said, peering at his computer display. The dead man's ID was being backtracked, along with that of the woman who'd arrived at the spaceport with him, but so far both probes were coming up dry. Probably another waste of time. "Anything on the landspeeder they rented?"

"Hasn't been spotted yet," Barclo said. "Of course, an Imperial might have altered the reg tag just on general principles."

"An unlikely term to use in the same breath with Imperial agents," Nyroska growled, scowling at the display. "I think it's about time we took back some of the initiative. I want you to check with the General as to how fast we could put together a sizable cash package."

Barclo's jaw dropped slightly. "You want to pay her off?"

"Not without knowing what exactly she's got," Nyroska said. "But if it does turn out to be as explosive as she claims, it would be nice to have some options available."

"I suppose," Barclo said, shaking his head. "I just hope you're not getting in too deep, Colonel. This is Imperial Intelligence we're dealing with, you know."

"This is my world, Barclo," Nyroska said coldly. "Our world, not Palpatine's. He may someday be able to run the whole Empire from Coruscant, but until then we do have certain jurisdictional and governmental rights here on Darkknell. And I am flighty well going to exercise those rights."

"Yes, sir," Barclo said, sounding subdued as he reached for his comlink. "I'll call the General right now."

Moranda clicked off her comlink. "Come on," she said. They crossed the street and entered the sweets shop she had marked before making her call to Nyroska. Weaving through the mass of mostly Duros customers, she led the way back to the employees' entrance in the rear and down a flight of steps to the street at the bottom of the hill. With gratifying promptness, the street-maintenance speeder truck she'd spotted from their earlier vantage point came lumbering by just as they reached the street, and a moment later she and Garm were safely nestled into the empty debris-storage bin in the back.

"You don't think they'll search this thing?" Garm asked, looking cautiously out through the rear access opening they'd just climbed in through.

"Not when they see the bin is already full of dirt," Moranda told him, unfastening her outer skirt and pulling it off. Flipping it over so that its brown side was showing, she arranged it across their feet and knees where it would be all that could be seen through the opening without a close examination. "It's all in perception."

"I suppose." He hesitated. "So he was shot with his own weapon?"

"Unless someone else in town is packing a Luxan," Moranda agreed soberly. "What do you think? Horn, or Isard herself?"

"Hard to believe it of either of them," Garm said, shaking his head. "Unless Isard found the datacards and assumed her assistant was in on it."

"Could be," Moranda said, studying Garm's face out of the corner of her eye. They'd kept their introductions on a strict first-name-only basis; but even through the simplistic disguise he was wearing there was something vaguely familiar about this man.

His eyes in particular. Very strong and knowing eyes, they were, rich with knowledge and wisdom and some deep but very private pain. Recent pain, too, if she was any judge of such things. Or maybe it was his voice. Was he someone she might have heard speaking on the newsnets?

Decisively, she turned her eyes away. The situation piqued her curiosity, but at the moment she had more urgent things to worry about than another man on the run. "Any sign of the airspeeders yet?"

"Oh, they're out there," Garm assured her, leaning over Moranda's knees to peer out past their makeshift camouflage. "Whatever else Colonel Nyroska might be, he's also fast on his feet."

"Yes," Moranda agreed. "Well, one more call hopefully should do it."

"Do what, get us caught?" Garm asked pointedly. "Aside from appealing to your playful side, I don't know what these calls are supposed to accomplish."

"We need to flush Isard out of hiding," Moranda told him patiently. "That means drawing her to some known location. Assuming she's smart enough to notice all this Defense airspeeder activity, I'm hoping it will intrigue her enough to head to one of the Security offices to find out what's going on. The only trick will be guessing which one she'll pick."

"Probably none of them," Garm said. "Odds are she'll go to the local Intelligence drop site instead."

Moranda blinked. "Intelligence drop site?"

"Sure," Garm said. "It'll have computer access capabilities, and maybe some extra personnel she can draw on. Probably not, though-this station should be too small to be continually staffed."

Moranda stared at his profile. "How do you know about all this?"

He shrugged. "I have access to certain files."

"Terrific," she growled. "And it didn't occur to you to mention this to me before now?"

He turned those piercing eyes on her. "Before now, I didn't know what you were going for," he reminded her mildly.

She ground her teeth. But he was right. "One of these days we really have to get our act together," she said. "Fine. Where is this drop site?"

"It's a small, apparently out-of-business boutique in the main west-side shopping district," he told her. "I don't remember the name, but I have the address."

"Good enough," she said. "As soon as we're clear of Nyroska's net, we'll find a landspeeder and get over there." She frowned as a sudden thought struck her. "I don't suppose this place would have a cache of extra weapons Isard could load up with, would it?"

"Probably."

Moranda nodded grimly. "Terrific."

They'd been sitting at the back of the crowded open-air tapcafe next to the ClearSkys Boutique for nearly half an hour when Moranda suddenly straightened up and nodded. "There she is," she said, nodding over the lip of her mug toward Bel Iblis's right.

Casually, taking a sip from his own drink as he did so, Bel Iblis looked in that direction. Barely twenty meters away a familiar landspeeder was pulling into a parking zone. And out of it stepped-"Well, well, well," Moranda murmured. "Horn's still with her."

"I told you Isard spun him a story back at Arkos's place," Bel Iblis reminded her.

"Sure, but I wouldn't have expected him to still be tagging along," Moranda said. "He should have sliced through her story long ago."

"Or else she should have gotten whatever she wanted from him and tossed him away," Bel Iblis agreed, frowning as Horn turned slowly around beside the landspeeder, automatically checking out the area. His eyes passed over them without a flicker of recognition, the breeze pulling his collar open as he continued his turn-- "Give me your macrobinoculars. Quickly."

"What's up?" Moranda asked, passing the tiny set to him beneath the table.

"Possible trouble," Bel Iblis told her. Concealing the macrobinoculars with hands and mug, he lifted them to his eyes and focused in on Horn's neck as they crossed the street toward the boutique.

One clear look was all it took. "Make that definite trouble," he said grimly, lowering the macrobinoculars. "Horn's wearing a choke-collar."

"Oh, lovely," Moranda said. "What a pleasant woman your Ysanne Isard is."

Isard keyed the door lock, and she and Horn disappeared into the ClearSkies.

"This changes things, Moranda," Bel Iblis said quietly, bracing himself for the inevitable argument. "That choke - collar's going to have a dead-man switch attached. I'm not going to risk Horn's death if Isard drops the thing or is injured or killed."

"I agree," she said. "On the other hand, there's no way I'm going to try to sneak those datacards out of the car if you aren't pinning them down with blaster fire was..."

"Wait a second," Bel Iblis cut her off, frowning. The inevitable had failed to happen. "Did you hear what I said? Horn's a good and valuable man, and I'm not going to risk his life."

"Yes, I heard you," she said. "I said I agreed."

"But..." was He floundered.

She lifted her eyebrows. "What, just because Horn's chased me halfway across the Empire you think I should be willing and eager to let him get vaped?"

"Something like that, yes."

She shifted her gaze away from and back to the boutique. "Strange as it may seem, Garm, over the past few years I've gotten sort of used to having Horn on my tail. He's a pretty good opponent, you know, well worth matching wits against. I rather enjoy that sort of challenge."

She smiled wryly. "Besides, I know that if he's the one who brings the hammer down on me, I'll be treated fairly. In Palpatine's grand new Empire there aren't a lot of enforcement types I would trust that far."

"I'm glad we're on the same side on this," Bel Iblis said, some of the tightness lifting from his chest. Arkos had known little about this woman except her name, but her airy confidence, deviousness, and pocket-picking talents had created in his mind the stereotypical fringe image, someone willing to do whatever it took to get what she wanted. The fact that casual murder, or even collateral murder, was apparently outside her ethical boundaries made working with her considerably more palatable to his own conscience.

In fact, it made her no worse than some of those he was already fighting alongside in the Rebellion. Maybe even no worse than the average. "So what now?" Moranda bit gently at her lip. "Were you able to get any details on the choke-collar?" she asked. "Design, manufacturer-anything?"

Bel Iblis searched his memory. "All I could see was that it was black," he said. "Oh, and it had what looked like a small keylock to the left of his throat."

"Interesting," she said thoughtfully. "Probably a Jostrian design, then-they use straight mechanical keylocks to keep anyone from scanning along lock frequencies and unfastening it."

"So we can't do anything?"

"I didn't say that," she said, still thoughtful. "Keep watch here-I'm going to pop into the little electronics shop over there."

"And then?"

She patted his hand. "Trust me."

"I was right," Isard said, tapping keys on the quiet-drop's computer. "Those Defense airspeeders were indeed responding to your friend Savich."

"Does it identify her by name?" Hal asked. Isard threw him a contemptuous look. "Of course it does. And she included her ID listing and associates profile, too. If you're going to ask stupid questions, Horn, keep your mouth shut."

Hal clamped down firmly on his tongue as Isard turned back to the computer with a snort. She had been becoming progressively more ill-tempered as the day wore on, and finding that their last known link between Arkos and the Continuum Void manager had flown the nest had apparently been the last click. The anger and frustration and bloodlust were simmering barely beneath the surface, held in check by sheer force of will.

And if something didn't break soon, Hal suspected, some of that bloodlust could very well expend itself on a convenient CorSec inspector whom she was clearly starting to consider less than useful to her.

He swallowed, the movement of his throat constricted noticeably by the unyielding noose around his neck. What in the name of Vader's tailor was in that missing datapack, anyway?

And then, at his belt, his comlink beeped.

Isard spun around as if she'd been stung. "What's that?" she demanded.

"My comlink," Hal said.

"I know it's your comlink," she bit out icily, sliding out of her chair and stepping over to him. "Who knows you're here?"

"Only Colonel Nyroska," Hal said, pulling out the device. "Do you want me to answer it?"

"Of course," she said, stepping close to him. "Maybe he's got a line on Savich."

Hal nodded and clicked it on. "Horn."

"Hello, Inspector," a cheerful female voice replied. "It's Moranda Savich. How are you?"

Hal felt his breath catch in his throat. "How did you get this frequency? "

"Oh, don't be silly," she chided. "You registered it when you arrived on Darkknell, remember? Unfortunately, your friend the Imp didn't do that, at least not under a name I could find. Is she there with you, by any chance?"

"I'm here," Isard spoke up, glacially calm. "You have my datapack?"

"Sure, if you have my money," Moranda said. "The price is one million, in Imperial currency."

Hal looked furtively at Isard's face, wondering if she was approaching meltdown yet. But to his surprise, the eyes gazing back at him were as calm and cool as any he'd ever seen. With at least a potential handle on the situation now, her earlier frustration and irritation had evaporated in! - plete professionalism.

"You have a rather inflated opinion of what it's worth," Isard said. "I'll pay you a hundred thousand."

Moranda sniffed audibly. "That's pretty chintzy, even for an Imperial. If you don't want to play, I'm sure someone else will."

"Like Colonel Nyroska, for instance?"

"Exactly like Colonel Nyroska," Moranda said approvingly. "That's right-I forget sometimes how adept you Imps are at slicing into official computer systems. You wouldn't happen to have noticed if he's pulled together his million yet, would you?"

"He's started making inquiries," Isard confirmed calmly. "I can assure you, though, that you'd rather deal with me."

"My plan is to deal with the top bidder," Moranda said pointedly. "Still, I'm sure Imperial Intelligence can bid higher than a backwater fuel stop like Darkknell."

"Most certainly," Isard said, her voice almost silky with implied menace. "Along with that hundred thousand I can also guarantee you the chance to leave here with your skin intact."

"Don't make me laugh," Moranda sniffed. "I've eluded Inspector Horn for years-you think I can't do the same with Imperial Intelligence?"

"No," Isard said flatly. "I don't think you can."

"Hear me shaking," Moranda said. "Here's the deal. I'll give you and Nyroska an hour to put together your packages-cash only, of course. Then I'll meet you both at the Number Fourteen warehouse in the Firtee Cluster north of town, and one of you will leave with the data pack. Clear?"

"Very," Isard said softly.

"And don't insult my intelligence by trying anything cute," Moranda warned. "I'm quite good at this sort of game. One hour, and come alone."

The comlink clicked off. "Certainly we'll come alone," Isard agreed, as if talking to herself as she sat back down at the computer. "We wouldn't want the inconvenience of witnesses, would we?"

"What are we doing?" Hal asked as she began keying the terminal.

"I am clearing out the potential ground clutter," she told him. "Specifically, I'm sending Colonel Nyroska's entire contingent on a little impromptu training exercise."

Hal felt his jaw drop. "You aren't serious. There's no way he won't catch something that blatant."

"Let him," Isard retorted. "By the time his squawks get anyone's attention the datapack and I will be long gone."

Hal grimaced. "Leaving him with nothing to do but find someone to pin the blame on. Me, for instance?"

Isard favored him with a cool, dispassionate look, then turned back to the computer. "Think of it as your opportunity to provide a unique service to the Empire."

"Yes," Hal murmured. "Of course."

"I can't say the General's exactly thrilled by the situation," Barclo reported, clicking off his comlink. "But he is rather intrigued by it. He says that if you can prove this datapack is genuinely worth a million, he can have the money ready in two hours."

"Good," Nyroska said, clicking keys on his computer. "Well, well: the backtrack on our big blond cipher down in the morgue just came up empty. Which means his ID was completely phony."

"Big surprise," Barclo grunted. "Half the ID'S in south Xakrea are probably phony."

"Yes, but not of this quality," Nyroska said. "His tracked all the way back to Coruscant before it petered out. That means--was

He broke off as his comlink beeped. "Here we go," he said, picking it up. "I'll bet you your next promotion this is her." He keyed it on. "Nyroska."

"Colonel?" an unfamiliar human male voice said. "My name is--well, never mind that. I'm an associate-- former associate, rather--of the woman you've been dealing with on this datapack matter."

"I see," Nyroska said. "What can I do for you?"

"You can get me out of this mess, that's what," the other said nervously. "This whole thing's gotten completely out of hand. Did you know she's actually caret baiting an Imperial Intelligence agent? This is getting way too dangerous, and I'm ready to cut my losses and get out."

"I applaud your wisdom," Nyroska said. "Get me the datapack, and I'll see to it that you walk away."

There was a pause. "Yeah," the caller said at last, a little uncertainly. "Problem: I don't actually have it myself. But I can finger her for you, and she does know

where it is. She'll be coming back to a tapcafe right next to something called the ClearSkys Boutique, and she'll be back any minute now. Get over here fast, okay?"

"We're on our way," Nyroska promised. On the last word, the comlink clicked off.

"Well?" he added to Barclo.

"Could be a feint," Barclo said, frowning at his board. "On the other hand, the trace puts him in that area. I'd say it's worth checking out."

"Agreed," Nyroska said, keying his computer. He paused, keyed it again. "What in-his"

"What is it?" Barclo asked.

"My troops," Nyroska said, waving at the computer. "They've all been sent out to the spaceport."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know," Nyroska gritted, slapping at the keys. "They're phony orders—they have to be. The General wouldn't have pulled them without alerting me first. But the orders show proper authorization, and they're locked in." He swore. "And the troops are locked incommunicado, too."

Abruptly he got to his feet. "Ten to one it's a delaying tactic by our datapack thief," he ground out. "And I have no intention of being delayed. Grab Thykele from the outer office, and let's go."

"You think three of us will be enough?" Barclo asked, pulling his blaster from a desk drawer as he stood up.

"We'll make it enough," Nyroska said grimly, checking his own blaster and jamming it into his holster. "This time she's not getting away."

They had left the boutique and were heading across the street when Hal's comlink beeped again. "Do I answer it?" he asked.

"Probably better," Isard grunted, getting a grip on his arm and leading him over to the side of the street beside their landspeeder. "Savich may not be finished playing her little games yet."

Hal pulled out the instrument, giving the area around them an automatic once-over as he did so. There'd been some turnover in the tapcafe's clientele since they'd gone inside the boutique, and a half block farther down the street a couple of Kubaz were unloading a speeder truck, but nothing else seemed to have changed. "Horn."

"Hello, Inspector," Moranda's voice came back. "Just wanted to see if you and your Imp were still on schedule."

"We're working on it, yes," Hal said.

"Good," Moranda said cheerfully. "I also wanted to tell you that I've talked now with Nyroska, and he's ready to offer me two million."

"Is he, now?" Isard put in, glaring at the comlink in Hal's hand as if it were a display Moranda could see her through. Down the street, one of the Kubaz dropped a crate onto the street with a loud thud. "Now you listen to me, you little walking dead woman," she bit out. "And listen closely."

She began voicing an exquisitely detailed threat, a recitation Hal would normally have paid close attention to if only for professional interest. But in this case, he wasn't even listening. Isard, her full attention focused on her anger and pride and threats, had apparently missed completely the fact that the crash of that dropped crate had been echoed faintly on Moranda's comlink carrier.

Which meant that Moranda was here somewhere.

Slowly, carefully, Hal let his eyes track across the area, studying every visible face and searching windows and doorways for less than visible ones. His gazes fell on a woman about Fifteen meters away at one of the tap - cafe tables, her face in profile to him as she gazed meditatively at the distant mountains rising over the cityscape, a mug held to her lips. She was the right height and build, but he could see both hands clearly enough to tell there was no comlink palmed in either of them. Unless she had the device clipped to her collar or something...

"I get the point," Moranda put in, cutting off Isard's threat. "Here's the route I want you to follow to the warehouse. Listen closely, and don't interrupt."

She launched into a detailed list of streets, corners, turns, and backtracks. As she did so, the woman at the tapcafe table set her mug down and stood up, digging a coin out of her hip pouch and dropping it on the table. She turned toward Hal and Isard and started in their direction, glancing back and forth between the various business signs lining the street.

And there indeed was no comlink fastened to her collar, nor a telltale bulge beneath her jacket where one might be hidden. Listening with half an ear to Moranda's instructions droning on from his comlink, Hal shifted his attention back to the doorways around the area. She had to be here somewhere..

..

"Hal?" a woman's voice called excitedly. "Hal Horn?"

He wrenched his eyes back to the woman approaching them. She was looking at him with wide eyes, her mouth gaping open in a happy grin of recognition. "It is you," she said, now almost bounding as she closed the distance toward him. "Well, I'll be a mynock's breakfast. Allyse Conroy-remember? How are you? "

"Uh," Hal said, glancing in confusion at Isard as he searched his memory in vain for an Allyse Conroy. "I'm..."

Isard plucked the comlink from his hand. "We've got trouble," she cut into Moranda's monologue. "Call us back in ten minutes." Without waiting for a response, she clicked off.

"Imagine running into y here on Darkknell, of all places," the approaching woman said, her grin if anything even bigger than it had been. "How are Nyche and Corran? He's what, sixteen years old now?"

"Eighteen," he said, flinching back as she raised her arms for a hug. But her ebullience was hardly to be stopped by anything as simple as a flinch, and the next thing he knew she had her arms around him, pressing her body tightly against his. "Ah-Allyse-was.."

"It's so good to see you," she said, her voice oddly muffled as she spoke into his shoulder, her face pressed against the left side of his face, her breath disconcertingly warm on his neck. "How have you been these last few years?" Hal glanced past the side of her head. Isard had now stepped around behind her and was giving Hal the same kind of look she'd just been giving the comlink. "Actually, Allyse, I'm kind of busy right now," he told her, trying to diplomatically ease her away from him. A waste of effort; her arms merely tightened all the harder around him. "In fact, I'm in the middle of something very important. I have to go."

"Imagine finding you here," she repeated. "Is this destiny, or what?"

Isard's eyes were starting to throw sparks. Bracing himself, Hal took a deep breath and got a firm grip on Allyse's ribs.

And abruptly froze. Faintly detectable with that incoming breath had been two distinctive aromas: the pungent tang of cigarra smoke, plus the more subtle scent of Gralish liqueur.

Moranda Savich?

He opened his mouth to speak; but before he could get the proper words lined up, the arms pinioning the two of them together loosened and she stepped back. He caught just a glimpse of the slender lockjimmie between her lips before it vanished again into her mouth and belatedly noticed the pressure of the choke-collar around his neck had disappeared...

And with her grin still in place, Allyse backed full tilt into Isard.

"I'm so sorry," she gasped, twisting around with feline speed and grabbing Isard's jacket in time to keep her from falling backward. "So very clumsy of me," she added, busily brushing down Isard's jacket where her grip had momentarily wrinkled it. "Are you all right?"

"Get away," Isard snapped, putting a palm against Allyse's chest and pushing her away. The shove sent her sprawling back against the side of the landspeeder, her hands scrabbling for balance and finding a grip across the top of the door.

"Well, sure," Allyse said in a subdued tone.

"You don't have to be so rough," Hal reproved Isard gently, his eyes probing Allyse's face. Usually he was able to pull Moranda's features out from under the mask of her many and varied disguises, but here, at first blush, anyway, he couldn't seem to find her anywhere in that indignant expression. Maybe it wasn't her, after all.

"She should be thankful I didn't get rough," Isard countered acidly. "Now get away from our landspeeder. We have business to attend to."

"I don't think so," a voice called from Hal's right.

He turned. Colonel Nyroska, flanked by two uniformed Defense officers, was striding in their direction. All three had blasters drawn.

"Colonel Nyroska," Hal nodded. "What brings you down here?"

"Your friend there, Inspector Horn," Nyroska said, his gaze shifting over Hal's shoulder. "She and I need to have a long talk."

"My friend?" Hal frowned, turning back to look at Allyse.

But she was not, as he'd expected, waiting with the wilted, defeated look of a criminal or fugitive who'd finally been run to ground. Instead, she was standing tall and proud, an almost haughty expression on her face. "I commend you on your excellent timing. Colonel," she said in a voice that matched the face as she gestured at Isard. "There's your thief, and my Rebel agent. Arrest her."

The sheer effrontery of it caught Isard completely flatfooted. "What in the-his" she sputtered. "You little-- back off!" she snapped as one of Nyroska's men reached for her arm. "Back off, all of you."

Her hand dived beneath her jacket, then froze in place as three blasters suddenly lined up on her face. "You're making a big mistake, Colonel," she said quietly. "A big mistake. I'm Imperial Intelligence Field Operative Ysanne Isard."

"Indeed," Nyroska said calmly. "You have ID, of course?"

"Of course," she said, shifting her hand elsewhere beneath her jacket. Her hand paused, her face changed, and she spun her head around at Allyse. "Give it back," she snapped. "My ID. Give it back."

"Nice try," Allyse said patronizingly, lifting her arms. "As you're welcome to confirm. Colonel, I don't have anything of hers. However, if you'll escort us back to your headquarters, I'll be happy to have my staff transmit the credentials she mentioned."

Isard's mouth dropped open. "You'll what?"

"Present my credentials," Allyse said, turning a glacial look on Isard. "You see. Colonel, I am Field Operative Ysanne Isard."

"This has gone far enough," Isard snarled. "Horn, tell the Colonel exactly who I am."

"Inspector Horn?" Nyroska invited.

Hal hesitated. "She did tell me she was Field Operative Isard," he conceded. "But the only ID she showed me identified her as Darkknell Special Security agent Katya Glasc."

"Did it, now," Nyroska said, his voice suddenly cold as he looked at Isard with heightened interest. "Impersonating law enforcement personnel is a class-one offense on Darkknell. And is she by any chance the one who put that highly illegal device around your neck?"

Hal reached up and pulled the loosened choke-collar away. "Yes," he said, handing it to the colonel.

Isard's eyes were simmering pools of death. "You're dead, Horn. Dead."

"I can only say what I know," Hal said. "Anything in the way of further proof is up to you."

"Indeed it is," she breathed. "All right. Colonel, you win. Let's go to your headquarters and sort this out." She looked at Allyse. "Let's all of us go."

"Of course," Nyroska said softly. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Bel Iblis waited five minutes after Moranda and the others had left the scene before cautiously approaching the now abandoned landspeeder and letting himself in. No one shouted in triumph at his appearance; no one, so far as he could tell, even noticed him. Two minutes later, working awkwardly in the cramped space, he had the inner door panel off.

The datacards were there, all right, jumbled together at the bottom of the narrow space. Nestled in among them was an extra datacard, this one bearing official Imperial markings. Ysanne Isard's missing Intelligence ID, no doubt.

For a moment Bel Iblis considered taking it with him, decided it wasn't worth the risk of getting caught with it, and left it where it was. Besides, if Moranda was right about being able to talk her way out of detention-- though how she was going to do that he couldn't even begin to imagine--she might want to track down the vehicle and borrow the ID herself.

He refastened the panel loosely back in place, feeling a twinge of stung conscience as he did so. Yes, this had all been Moranda's idea in the first place, a challenge she'd seemed eager to take on, but this was his mission, and the Rebellion's, and yet it was Moranda who had ended up doing most of the work and taking all of the risks.

And not for the flat million in Imperial currency she'd demanded from Isard, but for the relative pittance he and Arkos had been able to throw together. Someday, if they all lived through this, he would have to find a way to make it up to her.

And the first step in the survival process, he reminded himself, would be to rendezvous with Arkos and get himself and these datacards off Darkkneel and back to the Rebellion. And there to find out what exactly Tarkin's Death Star project entailed.

"Good luck, Moranda," he murmured as he climbed out of the landspeeder and closed the door gently behind him. "May the Force be with you. May it be with us all."

Hal would have bet money that Isard's eyes couldn't have gotten more wild than they had been outside the ClearSkies Boutique. He was wrong.

"What do you mean she's gone?" she thundered, looming over Nyroska's desk like a berserk storm cloud. "How could she be gone? You locked her in a cell, for Pal patine's sake!"

"I'm sorry. Field Operative Isard," Nyroska said apologetically, clearly trying to press as far back into his chair as he could manage. "My people assured me she was properly secured. Apparently they were wrong."

"Apparently they were idiots," Isard shot back. "And what precisely are you doing to recapture her?"

"We have an all-planet alert out," Nyroska told her. "If she's still on Darkknell, we'll get her."

Isard's snort concisely delivered her opinion of that. "And you," she bit out, turning her glare onto Hal. "If I find out that was Savich - comand that you knew she was and didn't say anything-I'll have your head for shockball practice. Clear?"

"Clear," Hal said. "And I repeat: I don't see how it could have been her standing there hugging me when she was on the comlink at the same time giving us directions to the warehouse. Best guess is that it was her ally running interference for her."

"In that case, you'd better hope Nyroska catches her," Isard said. "Because if she or anyone else gets off the planet with that datapack, I'll have both your heads."

She turned back to Nyroska. "I'll be at my ship," she ground out. "You've got my comlink frequency. Let me know if anything turns up on either woman. Anything. Understood?"

"We will. Field Operative Isard," Nyroska said humbly.

Spinning around, she stalked to the door and stomped out.

Nyroska exhaled raggedly. "We're in trouble now, Inspector," he said quietly. "The whole Empire may be in trouble if that datapack gets off-planet," Hal agreed. "At least, if her reaction to the whole situation is anything to go by. But to be honest, I don't think you and I are going to take the brunt of it, not from

her anyway. Isard has about three TIE squadrons' worth of pride, and bringing official Intelligence wrath down on us will put her in an embarrassingly bad light."

"As bad a light as it would put us in?"

"Probably not," Hal conceded. "But people like that only risk losing face if the potential rewards are worth it. Frankly, neither of us qualify." He shook his head. "No, whatever shrapnel comes of this is going to hit elsewhere."

"Against members of the Rebel Alliance, perhaps?"

Hal shrugged. "Or those Isard decides are members," he said. "Whether they are or not."

Nyroska tapped his fingertips against the side of his desk. "A mess, indeed," he said. "I wouldn't want to be in her boots when she has to go back and report this to her father."

Hal nodded soberly. "I'll drink to that."

"What is this?" the barman demanded, frowning at the two small items resting in the palm of his hand.

"They were inside the mug at that table over there," the young cleaner said excitedly, pointing across the tapcafe. "The one where the dark-haired woman was sitting."

"Which? The one involved in that Defense Agency to - do down the street?"

"Yes, her." The cleaner pointed at the comlink in the barman's hand. "See, the comlink is still on. I tried talking, but no one answered."

"Cut off from the other end," the barman grunted.

"That's what I thought," the cleaner agreed. "But that recorder is the really strange part. Go ahead-play it."

Throwing the kid a speculative look from under his bushy eyebrows, the barman plucked the wafer-thin recorder from his palm and touched the play button.

"Next, you're to cross the street and pick up a northbound transport," a female voice came from the device. "If there isn't one there, just wait-there will be. You ride it to the corner of Pontrin and Jedilore, then get off and go into the clothing store you'll find on the corner-was

"You hear that?" the cleaner said. "It's like a treasure hunt, isn't it?"

The barman sniffed. "It's a prank," he declared, shutting off the recording and thrusting it and the comlink back at the cleaner. "Here-you can keep them."

The kid took them uncertainly. "But what if it isn't a prank?"

"It is," the barman assured him with a sniff. "Trust me, lad. There's no treasure worth hunting for on Dark knell. Never has been; never will be."

Epilogue

by Michael A. Stackpole

Armand Isard looked up from his desk, slightly more angry that his daughter had left the door open behind her than that she had entered without requesting permission to do so. She advanced toward him too quickly, her mismatched eyes ablaze. He held up a hand, then pointed to the chair before his desk. "Please, be seated."

She glanced at the chair, then looked at him. "Can I be sure it is safe?"

"If the result of this operation was for you to be killed, you'd already be dead, Agent Isard." Armand tried to keep his voice as cold as he would when addressing any insubordinate operative in his organization, but a hint of anger bled into x anyway. "Please."

She settled herself onto its brown synthleather cushion, though her body seemed as tense as if he were asking her to sit in a chair bristling with sharp transparisteel fragments.

He tapped the datapad on his desk.

"I've read the report you sent about the action on Darkknell, and I have spoken to the Emperor on your behalf. You won't be killed despite your failure."

Her posture eased a bit, but not quite in the way he would have expected. She leaned forward, less stiff, more supple, like a predator getting ready to pounce. "I do not fear for my life at the Emperor's hands. Father."

"No?"

"No. He read the report on Darkknell, the full report on Darkknell."

Her words froze his heart in his chest, and the appearance of two Royal Guards slipping in through the open doorway started it beating again, very fast. "What do you mean? What full report?"

Ysanne snorted. "Did you think I wouldn't see what was going on, Father? You send me off on a mission of incredible delicacy-one you clearly would give only to an agent you had the utmost trust in. It was also a mission that would get that operative killed if she failed, and that was your aim all along."

"This is nonsense!"

"Hardly." Ysanne let a smile slither across her lips. "You see, Father, your plan succeeded. The information you wanted stolen has been communicated to the Rebels, and we know you had a hand in it. I found fingerprints and other trace evidence that identified the Rebel agent sent to retrieve the plans. It was Garm Bel Iblis."

Armand Isard's stomach folded in on itself. "Bel Iblis? Impossible. He was blown up. The bomb killed his whole family."

"Oh, well acted, Father, very well acted, but we both know that's not true, don't we?" She laughed lightly. "You got word to Bel Iblis and got him out of the bomb's range. You didn't mean it for him anyway: you wanted his wife, Arrianya, dead. She was the last link he had to the Empire. She was devoted to the Emperor, so at the bidding of Rebel Masters you had her slain, forcing Bel Iblis to ally himself fully to the Rebellion."

"That's absurd, completely untrue and absurd." Armand forced himself to breathe normally. "You have no proof of any of this."

"You approved the operation that was supposed to kill Bel Iblis, so you clearly knew how to thwart it. And you sent me out on a mission you knew would fail so I would be eliminated. You would use my death at the Emperor's order as an excuse to go over to the Rebellion. With you there to reveal the Empire's secrets to them-- and the Death Star datacards were proof you could deliver-- they would welcome you. You would overthrow the Emperor, then betray your Rebel companions and take the throne yourself. It's a brilliant plan. Father, simple and yet so effective."

Armand shot to his feet and pointed at the Royal Guards. "Arrest her. Clearly she has gone over to the Rebellion and has concocted this story to remove me, crippling the effort to find and destroy the Rebels."

Neither of the scarlet-armored Royal Guards moved.

Ysanne Isard stood and slowly smoothed her tunic. "They're here, Father, to conduct you to the Emperor. I believe he wishes to discuss with you the course of the rest of your life. It is to be a short conversation."

Armand Isard stared gape-jawed at his daughter, then closed his mouth and sighed. "I had expected this someday, you know, Ysanne."

"Of course; I am your daughter." She came around the side of his desk and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "It's over for you now. Father, but fear not." She dropped herself into his chair. "The Isard legacy is in very good hands."

One That Got Away

The following is a personal account by Jodo Kast, the renowned bounty hunter, about his failure to capture Doctor Evazan after locating him in the Corellian star system. The data was transmitted to the Empire, and subsequently intercepted by Alliance agents.

"I have thousands of eyes. They stretch across the galaxy and whenever they see something, Jodo Kast is not far behind. This time, I was following a prize to the Corellian system, to a tiny little city I'd never even heard of before — and I've been most everywhere.

"The quarry was Doctor Evazan. He was practicing again, and a million credits bounty was what he was worth to me, dead or alive. That's my favorite sort of hunt, dead or alive. You can blast away to your heart's content without worrying about the mess.

"The doctor deserved as much pain as I could inflict. This Evazan had mangled people, leaving them dead — or even worse, alive. I would show him the true meaning of pain.

"My sources told me he was 'operating' out of a little rent-a-clinic near the outskirts of town. I saw his trademark advertisement on the wall as I stepped inside. 'Don't trust a droid with your life. Trust us. Creative Surgery — The Cutting Edge.'

"I couldn't help but chuckle as I entered the archway and climbed up the stairs. When I reached the lobby, a Govian 'receptionist' stood up in shock, but before she could open her mouth I'd stunned her neatly. A blaster shot would have been more my style, but blasters are noisy.

"I could hear him mumbling to himself down the hall, something about packing up his belongings and leaving. Apparently I got there just in time. Bursting through the door, I began pumping blaster bolts into him before he could react.

"At that moment I realized that I'd ventilated a dummy, and that a monitoring screen was still trained on the front office. My stealth had been ineffective. The window was open and my quarry was running quickly down the street.

"The average bounty hunter would've given up, but Jodo Kast is far from average. Holstering my gun, I flipped my jet pack into action. As I glided to the street, a few steps behind my quarry, I felt that same exhilaration that always precedes a catch. You can't buy that kind of feeling.

"I started running after him as my jet pack is more

of a hindrance than a help in narrow streets. As he ducked around a corner, I removed a good chunk of fibrolite from the wall next to him with a mistimed blaster bolt. He was slippery all right, but no one's too slippery for Jodo Kast.

"As I rounded the corner, I saw a docking bay in the distance. This was the first time I had ever been worried about failing. I had not brought any grenades or detonite with me, as I wanted him reasonably intact for identification purposes. If he made it into his ship, he would be in hyperspace by the time I could get to my own ship, the Foxcatcher.

"Evazan was wheezing badly, and as he reached the bay, he turned and fired at me. My armor easily deflected the bolt, and I moved up with confidence.

"It was then that I realized he was cornered. He had entered the wrong docking bay or something. He had no place to run and it was only a matter of time before the better man won.

"I moved up, doorway to doorway, trash bin to trash bin, until I was at the edge of the bay. Evazan was hiding behind a ship, a typical beat-up Corellian light freighter.

"Moving up into the bay, I started laying down covering fire. Luck was with me, as a stray bolt grazed his face. Just the way I like them. Not dead, just damaged a bit.

"I moved forward carefully, just in case he was only faking the screams. I was a good ten meters away when I levelled my blaster at his limp form. I was about to become a million credits richer with one smooth pull of the trigger.

"Just then, a concealed turret popped out of a compartment on the ship's underside and opened fire. One shot from the heavy weapon ripped a hole in my armor, and it was then that I decided that the odds were against me. With a blast of my jet pack, I leaped for a nearby roof.

"Behind me, I could see that son of a rancor, Ponda Baba, at the controls of the ship. I remembered the grudge he still carried for a small incident in the recent past. But before I could rectify any oversights on my part, the ship blasted up and into the darkening sky.

"It had ended for now, but Jodo Kast never forgets. Someday my eyes will spot Evazan or Baba, and when they do I won't be far behind.

Jatz Musician Roi Deported From Rimma

Recardeon, Rimma

Jatz musician Fitz Roi, perhaps as well known for his flamboyant and often disastrous stunts as for his magical touch with the Fahn horn, has once again managed to bring his concert tour to a blasting halt when his latest exploit resulted in immediate expulsion from Rimma, where he was due to perform in a concert the following morning.

Rimma officials were not amused when Roi, while patronizing the Teirra Parko, wildly shot his famous antique projectile pistols at random fixtures in the Crystal Room. Several of Rimma's historical artistic artifacts on display in the Crystal Room were damaged or destroyed in the chaos, and officials moved quickly to deport Roi permanently from Rimma. Roi had reportedly been drinking prior to the incident, and was responding to a challenge issued by a fellow occupant of the Crystal Room.

Roi's millions of Rimma system fans, who had descended en masse on Recardeon for the concert, went on a rampage upon hearing that the concert had been canceled, causing several hundred thousand credits of damage to downtown property.

Flangth-2-Go, the sponsor of the concert tour, is reportedly considering dropping sponsorship due to the incident. They nearly did so last month when Roi appeared on stage in Camalar, Esseles in the garb of a Jedi Knight, but relented at the last moment. Roi may not be so lucky this time.

TriNebulon News

The Farlander Papers

Three months later, Tondatha still lay in ruins. The death toll had been too high, the destruction too thorough, to attempt rebuilding.

Incredibly, I had survived with only minor burns and a mild concussion. The wounds of my spirit, however, were much deeper than those of the flesh.

Both my parents were dead. My sister, Kitha, had been badly burned, and I had resolved to send her to Oorn Tchis, where we had relatives and where she might receive treatment. I feared that she would never recover.

I stayed behind. I had no idea what I would do on Agamar, but I think even then that I was considering the Rebellion. I needed a new home, but more than that, I needed a focus for what was left of my life.

More than anything else, I craved revenge.

I had already suffered my punishment, now, I reasoned, I would commit the crime.

I moved to Calna Muun, and lived by doing odd jobs. I kept to myself, but I also kept my ears open. Several months passed.

I sought out places where the talk, in Imperial terms, was treasonous. People spoke with conviction of the Rebellion, and, when they heard my story, they accepted me without much hesitation. And though they trusted my sincerity, they also respected my grief, and sensed correctly that I was not yet ready to commit my life to the Alliance.

That was about to change, completely and forever.

One evening, deep in discussion with other friends of the Resistance, the word was passed that the time for decisive action was at hand, and that an important Rebel leader would soon arrive to address the groundswell of Alliance support on Agamar.

Until that time, our clandestine meetings were filled with talk, but often in the abstract. Concepts such as truth, justice, and freedom from tyranny were easy rallying points, but what, we wondered, could Rebels on Agamar do to bring down the mighty Empire? The rhetoric served to keep people interested, but it had grown tiring. Now, perhaps, a time for action was finally at hand.

Somehow I knew that this was what I had been waiting for.

Rebel Cruiser *Independence*

In Transit to Agamar in the Lahara Sector

"Some soothing Dagoban bentaxne berry tea, Madam?" The protocol droid stood rock-still, bent at the waist like the major domo of a fancy Celanon

restaurant. His saucer-like eyes stared blankly, perpetually optimistic. In his hand he held a tray with a steaming plastcore cup.

"No, thank you, Deesix," answered Mon Mothma, Chief of State of the Rebel Alliance. A former senator of the old Republic, Mon Mothma had played a pivotal role in the unification of the scattered forces of resistance to the Empire. As the elected head of the Alliance, she held absolute power of command, but now she rested in her private study, her feet up on her desk. She was noticeably tired. The years of unceasing travel, gathering support for the growing Rebel movement, weighed heavily on her. With a visible effort, she sat straight at her desk as the droid approached, smiling wistfully, and said, "I've got several hours of work still ahead of me."

"As you wish, Madam," the droid said, walking stiffly over to the recycler and placing the cup in it. "If you don't mind, Madam, I'll go on half power, then." The Chief of State nodded her agreement and turned her attention to the terminal on her desk.

An hour passed in silence as Mon Mothma worked her way through a stack of recent communiques. Her voice droned softly into the terminal receiver and every once in a while she bent over the security coupler to sign off with a retinal scan and voice authorization. The droid stood statue-like, his body upright, his head slumped forward as if asleep.

"Deesix?"

The droid was instantly at attention. "Madam?"

"Didn't you tell me earlier that there was a new speech for me to deliver tomorrow?"

"Indeed I did, Madam. I have it here somewhere. Oh, where did I put it?" The droid shuffled across the room, his head moving back and forth jerkily. Finally he stopped in front of a cabinet and opened a drawer. "Here it is!" he announced, holding up a small holo disk.

Meanwhile, Mon Mothma saw that she had two more messages on the net. She punched up the first of them:

To: Mon Mothma

From: Arhul Hextrophon

I've given your droid, D6-L5, a new draft of the speech you wrote. Please look it over and send final comments to my office. As you know, Mon Mothma, you will be delivering this speech tomorrow on Agamar. They have a growing resistance movement, but have not yet committed to the Alliance. This new speech should help decide them, along with the leaflets and the new holos you saw last week.

I will be available at any time, if you should wish to contact me.

Respectfully,

Arhul Hextrophon

The second memo read:

To: Mon Mothma

From: Lazlo

You should meet a new ambassador in two weeks.

There was no signature. Mon Mothma's forehead creased as she deleted this innocent-looking message. It was in a very private code. Automatically, she had deciphered it. "Lazlo" was really General Madine. "You should meet a new ambassador" meant she was needed to plan operations against a priority Imperial target. "In two weeks," in this context, meant in two days.

She looked up with a start. Deesix was placing the holo disk on the desk before her. "Is something wrong, Madam?" he asked.

With a sigh, she picked up the holo disk. "No, Deesix. Everything is all right. You may as well rest again, though. I shall be a while yet."

"As you wish, Madam," answered the droid, instantly reassuming the sleep position.

Mon Mothma popped the disk in its slot and began to read. As she read, she corrected and annotated the speech using her light pen. Lazlo's message had been noted and mentally filed. She would head for Mon Calamari right after the speech on Agamar.

A CALL TO REASON

SPEECH TO BE DELIVERED FIRST ON AGAMAR

BEINGS OF THE GALAXY UNITE! SHED THE YOKE OF IMPERIAL OPPRESSION!

THANK YOU FOR COMING TODAY. IT IS A PLEASURE TO BE ONCE AGAIN ON THE BEAUTIFUL PLANET OF AGAMAR. FIRST I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT THIS AREA HAS BEEN SURROUNDED BY OUR FORCES. IT IS HEAVILY SHIELDED. OUR BATTLE CRUISER ORBITS ABOVE US, AND PICKET DROIDS HAVE BEEN DEPLOYED. IN OTHER WORDS. THERE IS NO CHANCE OF AN IMPERIAL SURPRISE ATTACK. YOU ARE SAFE AMONG US... FOR THE MOMENT.

DID YOU KNOW...

THAT THE OLD REPUBLIC WAS A DEMOCRATIC UNION OF WORLDS GOVERNED BY A DULY ELECTED SENATE! THAT IT REPRESENTED THE NEEDS OF ALL BEINGS REGARDLESS OF RACE, SPECIES, OR HOME SECTOR?

THAT "EMPEROR" PALPATINE WAS ONCE A SENATOR. AND THAT HE HAS SEIZED POWER, STOLEN OUR FREEDOMS, DISBANDED THE SENUTE, AND CRUSHED ALL DISSENT?

THAT THE CURRENT EMPIRE IS IN THE PROCESS OF SUBJUGATING OR DESTROYING THE NON-HUMAN RACES?

THAT THERE IS HOPE?

TAKE A MOMENT WITH ME NOW, MY FRIENDS, AND LEARN ABOUT THE GREATEST PERIL OUR GALAXY HAS EVER FACED! THERE IS HOPE. BUT ONLY IF YOU KNOW WHY YOU'RE FIGHTING. DO YOU KNOW WHO YOUR FRIENDS ARE? DO YOU KNOW YOUR ENEMY?

The old warehouse was buzzing with low, nervous voices. Each of us had been assigned different arrival times, and small groups of Resistance members had been entering the meeting place for about an hour. As I watched the room fill to capacity, I could feel the tension rising.

There was good reason for the nervousness. This was a big gathering of Resistance members, and would therefore be a perfect target for an Imperial surprise attack. Despite the assurances we had been given, the risks involved seemed considerable.

While the crowd waited for the meeting to come to order, I took the opportunity to strike up several brief conversations, learning some interesting bits of information in the process. Speaking in hushed tones, I discovered:

- That the Old Republic was indeed a democratic union of worlds, governed by a duly elected Senate, and that it represented the needs of all beings, regardless of their race, species or home sector.

- That Emperor Palpatine was a Senator himself, before seizing power and beginning a tyrannical rule. Under Palpatine, much personal freedom had been subjugated, and all but a small faction of dissent crushed.

- That currently the Empire was in the process of enslaving or destroying all the nonhuman races.

- And that, despite the seemingly invincible might of the Empire, many in the audience held out hope for the Rebel Alliance.

The background noise evaporated abruptly as a woman stepped onto the makeshift dais at the front of the room. I heard whispers of "Mon Mothma," and I realized that this was the founder of the Alliance herself. The entire room tensed in preparation for her first words. A few scattered whispers were the only sounds.

The woman on the dais paused a moment, and the crowd stood silently, thinking about what she was saying, each in his, her, or its own private world of thought. Keyan Farlander stood among them, listening to the Rebel Chief of State, taking in every word of her speech. He stood in an abandoned warehouse along with perhaps two hundred others. He had joined the growing

ranks of the Resistance on Agamar only a month before, and was burning with righteous fervor. His palms sweated as he dreamed of exacting his vengeance on the Imperial troops who had destroyed his village and murdered his friends and family.

Even though the site of the meeting was well guarded, Keyan was well aware of the risk every being in attendance was taking. For his part, all he wanted was to get his hands on the controls of a Rebel starfighter and blast an Imperial Star Destroyer into space dust.

But he was daydreaming and the Rebel leader looked as if she were about to begin again. With an effort, Keyan focused his attention back on the woman who had come to tell him about the world beyond Agamar.

The speaker seemed to take in a deep breath, as if she had spent too much time on starships and was grateful to breathe real planetary air. Then she launched back into her speech, pouring passion into each word, pausing often for dramatic effect.

"How did all this happen? Here's the short answer. GREED! CORRUPTION! DECEIT! OPPRESSION! TYRANNY! THAT IS THE STORY OF THE EMPIRE!"

As she intoned this indictment, the Alliance leader's voice resonated through the warehouse. Then she paused again as if to let this image sink in. When she continued, her voice was controlled, quiet, penetrating . . . the voice of a storyteller. Behind her, brutal images of Imperial oppression occasionally appeared on a simple flat-screen projector. Keyan and all around him were quickly transported back to another time, far, far away, but not so long ago.

"It wasn't always this way. We were at peace following the Clone Wars. Guided by the Jedi Knights and the government of the Republic, war-weary citizens rebuilt their lives and restored their worlds. The central authority of the Republic encouraged prosperity and freedom for all.

"But the galaxy is vast. With a thousand thousand worlds to govern, a few greedy senators found that they could abuse their power, at first in small ways, but ever more boldly. Slowly but steadily corruption infected the Republic. Wore and more senators, seduced by power and wealth, allied themselves

with special interests. And their corruption spread throughout the many worlds. The Republic was crumbling.

"Into this situation came a young senator named Palpatine. I remember him. Very ordinary. Very methodical. Nothing to call your attention . . . Just enough to keep his position. MAKE NO MISTAKE! This Palpatine was a Rodian in Ewok's clothing! His was a diabolical master plan, and he carried it out to perfection.

"The authority of the Senate was weakening at an alarming pace. Crime was on the increase everywhere while many worlds threatened secession. Others simply did as they wished while pretending loyalty. We needed a solution, and that is what Palpatine offered. Through a combination of political maneuvering, careful promises, and some out-and-out fraud, Palpatine got himself elected head of the Senatorial Council, President of the Republic. Many of the most honest and ethical senators backed him because he promised unity and had never joined among the most corrupt. At the same time, the worst members of the Senate expected a weak, controllable President, a figurehead to represent justice as they continued to serve the cause of self-interest.

"I was young, the youngest Senator ever elected until then. Even so, I soon saw this man for the monster he was. But everyone was so anxious for a solution

"Neither senatorial faction got what they had expected. Instead, with the power of the Presidency now secured, Palpatine suddenly emerged as a dynamic and increasingly ruthless leader, getting the government working again. Little by little, he assumed control, as the Senate consumed itself in bitter rivalries. Palpatine subtly encouraged this dissension while seeming to support various sides. He played us against each other, using every means imaginable to increase his control. He gained the loyalty of some senators through favors while others he swayed with blackmail or coercion. I wept when I could not get them to see the truth.

"Little by little, in ways so subtle that few realized what was happening, Palpatine took the reins of power from the Senate. When he was ready, he declared himself Emperor, announcing a New Order. He filled the senators' heads with grand rhetoric, promising to lead the Republic to a glorious golden age like that of the Kitel Phard Dynasty of old.

"It is Palpatine's new Order that now stomps on your freedom with an iron boot."

As Mon Mothma paused again, the crowd stirred restlessly. Keyan found his fists knotted tight. He was angry. Angry at the Empire. Momentarily angry at this former Senator who had let it happen. And he was inspired . . .

"Some of us tried to defy him, but the result is what you see. I am a fugitive now. Palpatine has grown more powerful on the Dark Side. With the help of the fallen Jedi Knight, Darth Vader, he deals swiftly and decisively with his enemies. If I had not escaped, I would now be dead. Palpatine's power is spreading, and with it the Darkness of his tyranny. This is how the Old Republic died. This is how the Empire was born.

"Look with me for a moment at what I call the Empire's Great Lie. "Emperor" Palpatine has continued the pretense that he would end social injustice and corruption. On the surface, his policies may seem to be aimed at righting the wrongs imposed by the waning Republic. But his true goal has always been the subjugation of the thousand thousand worlds and the enslavement of all galactic citizens. He rules by fear rather than by consent. He states that all beings are equal citizens while he carries out secret missions designed to destroy whole races.

"The Empire seems unbeatable. I hear that often. But witness what the "Emperor's" own Grand Moff Tarkin has to say:

"I have noticed that even the excellent pace with which Your Majesty is strengthening his fleets can scarcely provide security for the Empire should a significant number of planets begin to defy your will. We are many years away from a force vast enough to secure every system simultaneously."

"Rule through the fear of force rather than force itself. If we use our strength wisely, we shall cow thousands of worlds which might otherwise consider rebellion to some degree."

"The Empire is evil. It is guided by an evil creature on the Dark Side of the Force. DO NOT SUBMIT TO HIS WILL. RESIST NOW. They cannot subdue us all. They have admitted it! Only fear keeps them in power. If we act now, if we act

together, WE WILL CAST OFF THEIR OPPRESSION, DISPEL THE DARKNESS, AND DESTROY THE EVIL EMPIRE ONCE AND FOR ALL!"

Keyan found himself cheering with the rest of the crowd, and for a moment he was elsewhere. He had a brief image of standing with millions of beings, all determined to win their freedom back. He could feel them with him. Then the moment passed, and he stood in awe. He was no longer alone. He was ready to lay down his life to defend the Alliance. He listened to the rest of Mon Mothma's speech as if he were giving it himself-as if every word she spoke was his word; as if every thought was his as well.

"Even now, beings from all quadrants of the galaxy are rising up against injustice. They are bravely defying the Imperial overlords and gathering for a life and death struggle. They need your help.

"The Resistance is not alone. Before the Emperor disbanded the Senate once and for all, some of us took an active role against him. Chief among my allies was Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan. Though we seldom agreed on the Senate floor, we each understood the danger inherent in Palpatine's rise to power. We plotted secretly to overthrow him and to unite the rising tide of Resistance that has grown up in hundreds of systems and continues to spread. I bring you an offer of unity, of power, of total Rebellion. Only by working, together, by coordinating your efforts with those of other planets and systems, can you hope to defy the might of the Empire. I urge you to join the growing Rebel Alliance. SEPARATE, WE SHALL FAIL. TOGETHER, WE SHALL PREVAIL!"

The crowd erupted again, and the cheers went on for several minutes. When the room was once again quiet, and not a moment before, Mon Mothma continued.

"Even as Senator Palpatine outmaneuvered and defrauded the Senate, Bail Organa and I plotted secretly, meeting repeatedly at Chatham House, Organa's home in Imperial City.

"At first, Organa had resisted my call for a general revolution, horrified at the thought of abandoning the government to which he had devoted much of his life. Then came the massacre at Ghorman, a small planet in the Sern sector, just outside the Core Worlds.

"Following the incident at Ghorman, Bail Organa agreed to assist in the diversion of weapons and funds to the growing Resistance effort. Perhaps even more importantly, Organa helped the Rebel Alliance gain classified information that was integral to our early survival.

"In fact, when I was eventually discovered as a Rebel leader, well-placed operatives allowed me to flee the capital only moments before I would have been apprehended.

"The stated goal of the Rebellion has been to create an Alliance of planets, as was first accomplished in the Corellian System. Under the guidelines discussed during the Chatham House meetings, the three major Resistance groups were convinced to join together. Under a system of centralized leadership, the Corellians enjoyed the benefits of increased communication, and greater access to much needed funds, supplies and weaponry.

"The Corellian Treaty was the true beginning of the Alliance, and remains a shining example that there is enough strength in Rebel unity to combat even the Empire.

"Since the signing of the Corellian Treaty, I have traveled from world to world, and been welcomed by beings of conscience, independent thinkers, and victims of Imperial atrocities. They have joined the Alliance, as I hope you good beings will also join. I have come as a messenger of hope, offering fellowship in a growing galactic movement."

It was then that B'ante Hatcher, the leader of the Resistance on Agamar stepped forward, and addressed Mon Mothma with mock skepticism.

"But what does the Alliance have to offer us!" said Hatcher, doing his best to affect a whining lament. "Why should we join you!"

A nervous buzz swept across the crowd, but Mon Mothma hardly seemed caught off guard. As the chatter subsided, she continued her address.

"That's a fair question," Mon Mothma replied. "I'm glad you asked."

"Let's suppose that Imperial warships were headed for your planet, intent on causing complete destruction. You have perhaps a dozen obsolete Headhunter starfighters, and maybe five of them are battleworthy. Furthermore, you

wouldn't even know that the Imperial ships were on their way until they opened fire, because you have no tactical communication outside of Imperial channels.

"But suppose that Agamar were linked to a sector-wide network, with surveillance droids watching the Imperial fleet, and secret communiques from Allied worlds able to warn you well in advance of any threat. Neighboring systems would also be part of the network, ready to assist in your defense with men, weapons and starfighters.

"The benefits are obvious. How many lives might have been saved at Tondatha with advance warning?

"The Alliance offers experienced leadership, coordination of information, and logistical support for every world that truly desires freedom.

"And you needn't worry about trading one Empire for another. I am the Alliance Chief of State, and Supreme Commander of the Rebel Forces, but, unlike the Emperor, my job is temporary. Every two years, the Advisory Council calls a vote, and at any time they can replace the Chief of State. And, as soon as the Emperor is deposed, all the worlds in the Alliance will participate in forming a New Republic, and organizing a new governing body.

"Let me read to you an excerpt from our formal Declaration of Rebellion, which was addressed directly to the Emperor himself.

"We, the Rebel Alliance, in the name of and under authority from the free beings of the galaxy, solemnly declare our intentions:

- We will fight and oppose the Empire and its forces, by any and all means at our disposal.

- We will refuse to enforce any Imperial law deemed contrary to the rights of free beings.

- The Rebellion will continue until such time as the Emperor is dead, and the Empire dismantled and destroyed.'

"I have pledged my life to this cause, and I implore you to do the same.

"Also consider, for a moment, what I can the Empire's Great Lie. Palpatine has continued the pretense that he will end social injustice and corruption, but his true goal has always been the subjugation of worlds and the enslavement of citizens. He rules by fear, rather than by consent. He preaches that all beings are equal, even while he conducts ruthless campaigns of genocide.

"The Empire seems unstoppable. Often has that been said. But hear the words of Palpatine's own Grand Moff Tarkin, and consider them well:

"Even the excellent pace with which Your Majesty is strengthening his meets cannot provide security for the Empire, should a significant number of planets begin to defy your will,' noted Tarkin recently. 'We are many years away from a force vast enough to secure every system simultaneously.

"I would advise His Majesty to rule through the fear of force, rather than through force itself. If we use our strength wisely, we shall cow thousands of worlds which might otherwise consider rebellion."

Mon Mothma paused, allowing the words of Grand Moff Tarkin to be thought upon deeply before concluding her speech.

"Friends, the Empire is evil, guided by an evil creature in alliance with the dark side of the Force. You must find the courage within yourself to resist.

"They cannot subdue us all! They have admitted it! Only fear keeps them in power, and if we act now, together, we can cast off their oppression, and dispel this horrible Darkness. For the sake of all who cherish freedom, not only can the Empire be defeated, it must be!

"As we gather here tonight, other beings from all quadrants of the galaxy are rising up against the Empire's injustices, bravely defying the Imperial overlords in a life-or-death struggle. They need your help!

"The Resistance is not insignificant. Moff Tarkin himself has conceded that.

"The Alliance offers the peace and unity that all beings deserve, but this can only be achieved through total Rebellion. Only by working together, by coordinating efforts with other planets and systems, can the will of the

Emperor be defied. It is my urgent plea to you who have gathered here tonight: Join the growing Rebel Alliance. Separate, we shall fail, but together, we shall prevail!"

Afterward

The speech and the subsequent cheering were long since over, and most of the Agamar locals had departed. There had been some additional discussion of Mon Mothma's proposal, and it seemed almost certain that the Agamar Resistance would join the Alliance. Regardless, I had already made my decision.

As I stood listening to the others talk, a pretty young woman approached me. Her smile was dazzling, but her eyes were very serious. She was one of the Alliance team who had accompanied Mon Mothma, and she handed me a small synth-paper pamphlet, saying; "Read this. It will help you understand more."

As she walked away, she turned, and added; "Be sure to return that to me, or destroy it before you leave. To be caught with it by the Imperials means certain, painful death."

I took the small pamphlet, and began to read....

A Call to Reason

If you care about freedom and your future... join the Rebellion! Resist oppression, and help us form a New Republic based on equality and freedom for all beings!

This is your chance. Don't wait. Do it now!

In these pages, you will read about our galaxy, learn tolerance, and begin to understand what we fight for. Who are your friends? Who are your enemies? Learn the truth, and then join us!

Emperor Palpatine was once an uninspiring bureaucrat who, through deceit and political maneuvering, became first the President of the Republic and

later, the Emperor. Little is known about Palpatine. Many Suspect that he has great powers in the dark side of the Force, but how he acquired power is completely unknown. He was never trained by any Jedi Knight that we know of, yet much of his success is unexplainable if some larger Force is not taken into account.

Crimes of the Emperor (a partial list)

Emperor Palpatine has:

- disbanded the Senate, stifling any participation by citizens in the government;
- begun a policy of genocide against nonhuman races;
- removed the rightful leaders of planets and systems, placing his own lackeys as Moffs and Governors;
- arbitrarily raised taxes;
- murdered and imprisoned millions without trial or justice;
- stolen land and property from its rightful owners;
- created a military force whose sole purpose is tyranny!
- paraphrased from the Formal Declaration of Rebellion

End Racism - We're All in It Together

Many of you may have been approached by members of COMPNOR(Commission for the Preservation of the New Order). Beware. Though it started out as a well-intentioned and idealistic social club, COMPNOR is now another of the many propaganda organs of the Emperor. Though their message may sound reasonable on the surface, COMPNOR is run by the Select Committee, who are vassals of the Emperor.

What is the Emperor's purpose? From our analysis, COMPNOR's main goal is to spread a subtle philosophy of racism. Their goal is to turn Human against Wookiee, Mon Calamari against Quarren, Sullustan against Twi'lek.

Don't let this happen. We are all equal citizens of the galactic community. Don't let the Emperor's doctrine of hatred and racism turn you against your fellow beings.

When I had finished reading, I turned the pamphlet over. and perused the back cover. It read:

Are you ready to fight for your freedom? Are you prepared to lay down your life, if need be, to save your homeworld? Seek out the Rebel Alliance, and fight at our side. We will defend one another, and together, we will destroy the Empire.

I studied it a moment more, and then looked for the woman who had given it to me. She was nearby, working with the others to remove any evidence of the meeting that had taken place. I caught her eye, and she moved towards me. I handed her the pamphlet.

"I want to be a starfighter pilot," I said, and her eyes sparkled... with amusement?

Suddenly, I saw myself as she must have: Some backwater rube with dreams of glory. I started to take offense, and then realized that I fit the description perfectly. What did it matter? I didn't mind having something to prove.

"Where do I sign up!" I asked.

"You're sure that this is what you want!" she said, her expression changing to one of genuine concern. "It might be a long time before you can return to Agamar if you leave with us now."

"I'm sure," I told her, although I think that my voice wavered a little. "Anyway. there's nothing to keep me here."

"Well then, my name is Lynia," she said, extending her hand in greeting. "I'll introduce you to someone..."

Empire At War

The Assault On Kashyyyk

"Welcome. I'm relieved to see that you survived the Empire's assault on Kashyyyk, but our situation is still dire. You are all that remains of the forces there, and we have no other resources to draw upon."

—Mon Mothma, speaking to the few survivors of the battle^[src]

Some time prior to the Battle of Yavin, the Rebel Alliance had secretly developed and built a small outpost on the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk, doing so right under the Galactic Empire's nose. The outpost consisted of a planetary communications array for monitoring local radio traffic as well as a barracks building to house a small garrison.

After a Rebel patrol squad sent into the forest to perform a routine perimeter sweep disappeared, another patrol, Squad Three, was sent out to search for the lost unit. The disappearance of the Rebel squad was, in fact, part of a ploy set up by the local Imperial forces to discover the location of the hidden Rebel outpost. The Empire had deployed a communications jamming device in order to draw the Rebels out. The destruction of the device confirmed to the Imperial commander stationed there that there was indeed a Rebel presence, and an attack on the outpost was put into action immediately.

"We're tracking multiple Imperial transports incoming from the east!"

—Rebel Base Dispatch, immediately after the destruction of the Imperial jamming device

After destroying the jamming device and restoring their communications ability, all Rebel patrols were recalled in order to defend the base. When Imperial markings were discovered on the remains of the device, the commander was able to deduce that their existence had been compromised and that enemy forces were on the way. Soon afterward, an Imperial attack force consisting of TIE Maulers, stormtroopers, and All Terrain Scout Transports was able to advance upon and attack the Rebel outpost, having discovered its location. The attack was repelled, however, and the Alliance ground forces were able to move on to capture several Imperial landing zones deeper within the forest.

"An Imperial peace-keeping envoy deployed to Kashyyyk was assaulted by an unusually organized dissident group. This warrants our full

attention. I am sending you to investigate a derelict space station being used as a haven by these... Rebels."

—An Imperial officer stationed on Nal Hutta^[src]

After the Rebels captured the final Imperial reinforcement point on the surface, the Imperial Navy sent a task force consisting of four *Tartan*-class patrol cruisers and two *Acclamator*-class assault ships plus their TIE/LN starfighter support. The Imperial ships entered the star system and destroyed the small orbiting space station, which the Rebels had occupied and refurbished only a short time before the battle; though it was still in a dilapidated state, the station was functional enough to mount a meager defense. In the orbital exchange that followed, the station, along with a Rebel EF76 Nebulon-B escort frigate and several fighter and bomber squadrons, was destroyed. This action forced the Alliance to abandon Kashyyyk completely, retreating back to their base on the planet Bothawui.

In the wake of the skirmish in orbit, the Empire sent a scouting force down the planet's gravity well to reclaim Kashyyyk after the Rebel Alliance had been forced to evacuate. The surviving Rebel forces had retreated to the main Alliance Fleet, which was stationed over Bothawui at the time. The Rebel leader Mon Mothma was relieved to see that there were survivors from Kashyyyk, but she explained to them that the credit-strapped Alliance was now in dire need of new sources of income if it was to have any chance of withstanding further Imperial assaults.

The Battle Of Ryloth

"If we are to succeed in our assault, we will need to employ a strategy of my own making... one that requires both skill and cunning... one that ensures us a victory with minimal risk. We will direct our Acclamator ships to unleash their bomber squadrons upon the Rebels until they submit, and then—when they march, arms-raised, from their pitiful, smoldering base we will bomb them again!"

—An Imperial officer stationed on Nal Hutta

When the Imperial garrison stationed on Nal Hutta obtained information from the starship logs of a captured smuggler about a Rebel presence somewhere in a nearby star system, the local commander decided to deploy Viper probe droids to scout nearby planets. When Ryloth was revealed to be the home of a Rebel base, an Imperial task force was immediately dispatched to destroy it.

The Imperial advance force quickly moved to capture a landing area to allow their commander to land on the battlefield. A group of Jawas friendly to the local Rebels decided to attack Imperials on route to the Rebel base. After a short skirmish, scout troopers used thermal detonators to destroy the Jawa's sandcrawler home.

The Imperials moved on to destroy the Rebel power generator to bring down the base shield generator; after this was done, TIE bombers were called in for a bombing run on the Rebel installation, which included a barracks, a light vehicle factory and a communications array. Using the ruins of the power generator as a command point, the Imperial force moved into the Rebel base to destroy the barracks. After a last-ditch Rebel charge against the Imperials, a final bombing run was called in, obliterating all remaining Rebel forces.

Taking Thyferra

The Imperial forces landed on Thyferra, which had been revealed by Imperial intelligence to be Kalast's hiding place, a former Moff who had been leaking secrets to the Rebel Alliance. The reconnaissance force secured territory south of a small Rebel installation in the midst of Rebel bacta territory. A field commander led a squad of stormtroopers to sabotage Rebel sensors and communications. Following this, Darth Vader landed and rendezvoused with the Imperial forces. The Imperial Army moved into the northern hills, where they were ambushed by Rebel forces. Clearly, the Rebels still possessed intact sensors that had alerted the base's staff of the Imperial presence.

The lone sensor station was destroyed by the strike team. The Imperial force moved east and destroyed the base's power generator, where they were reinforced by a number of TIE Maulers and Stormtroopers and allowed to use bombing runs executed by TIE/sa bombers. The army moved into the base and wiped out the staff and defense. However, Kalast had escaped due to the field commander's incompetence, and therefore the officer was executed by Vader. Stormtroopers reported to Vader that pirate insignias had been found on Rebel weaponry during their search for survivors.

Crush. Kill, Destroy.

"My lord, reports are coming in from Fondor that rebel forces have been sabotaging our activities there. They have routed local troops and taken control of some settlements."

"Their retaliation only serves to give away their location. We will eliminate them quickly."

—An Imperial Officer and Darth Vader^[src]

While Darth Vader's forces based on Fondor were distracted fighting Rebel forces on Thyferra, the treacherous Moff Kalast had his Rebels take control of many cities on the Imperial factory world. The local citizens began to riot and assisted the Rebels in taking down the factories. Without the planet, construction on many key Imperial ships would be shut down.

Destroying civilian buildings claimed by the Alliance, the troops eventually captured an abandoned sensor array, where they were able to get intelligence and targeting information on the city.

The main city plaza was raked with fire, where the Imperials bombed and destroyed factories captured by the Alliance. Most rebels were soon destroyed or scattered, leaving the stragglers to be executed.

Darth Vader's force on Thyferra had won their battle and quickly found out about the disaster back on Fondor. He sent an imperial force that penetrated Fondor's defenses and landed in Fondor City. Routing the local Rebel Alliance troops and supporters, the retrieval force moved through the city.

Darth Vader: *"Fondor has been subjugated. Have you intercepted any information about our traitor?"*

Stormtrooper: *"We have cracked encoded transmissions which were redirected several times, but eventually routed to the Ilum system."*

Vader: *"The pirates' den, no doubt. Send a probe droid to confirm this...infestation."*

—Darth Vader and a stormtrooper^[src]

With the Fondor Uprising put down, Darth Vader could once again concentrate his efforts on getting Kalast. Vader eventually hired Boba Fett to venture to Ilum, where a pirate organization that supplied Kalast with weapons was found to be based.

The Pirate Menace

"The Empire is willing to pay a considerable fee for disposing of defense systems orbiting the Ilum system."

"Is my target one of the filthy pirates in that sector?"

"Your target is the defenses, the Imperial fleet will take care of the rest."
—Darth Vader and Boba Fett

The planet had heavy defenses installed, so Vader hired Boba Fett to use his stealth skills as the pilot of the *Slave I* to slip through their defenses and destroy the sensor pods, allowing the Imperial Navy to move in.

"Do not overestimate your value to the Empire, Fett. But your services are required here. Our target is the pirate leader, and he will be taken alive."

—Darth Vader to Boba Fett

With this done, the Imperial fleet was free to pursue the pirate leader, who tried to escape in his Pirate interceptor cruiser. Boba Fett hit a blow to the pirate's engines before he could jump to hyperspace, and the leader surrendered himself.

"Continue your interrogation, Fett. I am sure this pirate knows the Rebel's intentions."

—Darth Vader to Boba Fett

Their leader supplied the Galactic Empire with more information on Moff Kalast.

Sujagating Geonosis

"While you have been off chasing pirates, Vader, I've been informed the Death Star construction project has run low on certain resources and 'labor assets'."

—Tarkin to Darth Vader

With the Death Star project running out of construction slaves, Grand Moff Tarkin ordered Darth Vader to go to Geonosis and round up the natives to use as slave labor.

"I have picked a likely candidate which will provide us with the raw materials and work force for the project. I suspect the Geonosians won't see the benefit in this."

—Grand Moff Tarkin

Unfortunately for Vader, the Geonosians had secretly aligned themselves with the growing Rebel Alliance and the Geonosians already used as slaves revolted against their Imperial masters.

"Assemble your forces and lead the attack personally, Lord Vader."

—Tarkin to Darth Vader

A Rebel fleet orbited the planet to prevent the system from being conquered by the Empire. As the Imperial Navy entered the system, the resistance force ambushed the attackers. Concentrated fire from assault ships eventually brought down the Rebel space station. The survivors were routed out and destroyed by TIE squadrons.

The Imperial Army landed on the planet, put down the slave revolt, by destroying some of the hives that the Geonosians resided in, and scattered the remaining rebel resistance. The Rebellion had established a base on Geonosis to support the Geonosians. Vader's troops defeated the Rebel units stationed on Geonosis as well and destroyed the Rebel base.

"Though the Death Star project is of utmost importance, ensure you do not neglect the rest of the Empire. Rebel and pirate uprisings are becoming more frequent. This contagious behavior must be suppressed!"

—Tarkin to Darth Vader

As result of the battle, the Empire then gained a valuable source of slaves to assist in the construction of the first Death Star.

Attack On Mol Calamari

"The Rebel's strength will continue to grow as long as they continue to acquire allies. To that end, the potential firepower of the Mon Calamari fleet far exceeds that of the Rebels, and it would be a detriment if they joined forces. We must insure this does not occur."

—Emperor Palpatine

Despite the fact that Imperials had already attacked Mon Calamari, the emperor believed that sooner or later, the species would attempt to join the

growing rebel movement. Furthermore, the species was building more capital ships. If the shipyards joined the Rebellion, the Alliance Fleet would be able to compete with Imperial Star Destroyers.

Coming out of hyperspace, the Imperials proclaimed that the planet was under the control of the Empire. However a large force of Rebels, supported by a space station, attacked the invading fleet. The Imperials began to move against the Rebels.

The Imperial Navy focused on the space station, taking out the hanger and many weapon emplacements. despite being hammered by the rest of the enemy fleet, the Empire's navy began to take the upper hand.

However, two completed Mon Cal Star Cruisers arrived to out flank the Imperials. Finishing off the space station, the imperial fleet engaged the two capital ships. Despite heavy casualties, reinforcements continued to arrive, and the MC80 cruisers were destroyed. The remaining Imperial ships destroyed the enemy survivors.

The Imperial fleet captured numerous free Mon Calamari for use as slave labor. Meanwhile, the fleet annexed plans for new starships and placed them in a base on Carida.

However, the planet would only remain in the empire's control for so long. The annexed plans were recaptured, and the next imperial counterattack would fail.

Shipyard Diversion

During the early days of the Galactic Civil War, the Galactic Empire decided to nationalize the independent Incom Corporation, as it had done with other organizations before. However, much of the design and research teams of Incom strongly disagreed with this decision, to the point where many of them decided to defect to the Rebel Alliance in 0 BBY. It was through these defectors that the Rebellion learned of a facility on the planet Fresia holding the four prototypes of Incom's newest starfighter design: the T-65 starfighter, later known more commonly as the "X-wing" fighter.

The Rebel Alliance, in dire need of a new starfighter design to replace the aging Z-95 Headhunters that were in common use throughout the Rebellion at the time, dispatched a force led by Captain Raymus Antilles to secure the prototype X-wings from the Empire. However, when Antilles and his task force

entered into the Fre'ji system, they detected the *Imperial I*-class Star Destroyer *Tyranny* in orbit around Fresia. This caused a serious complication: with the *Tyranny* in orbit, the task force was unable to approach the planet.

"There's no way we're getting past that Star Destroyer. You'd think the Fresians would have warned us!"

"It's not their fault. The nationalization wasn't announced. The Emperor likes his surprises."

"So what now?"

"If the Tyranny is here, it's not at it's normal station... and the Tyranny is normally stationed at..."

"Kuat! The Imperial shipyards?"

"Yes! I think we can get their attention..."

—The pilot of the *Sundered Heart*, speaking with Captain Raymus Antilles

"This is the Kuat shipyard. We have come under Rebel attack. Requesting assistance."

"This is the Tyranny. Your satellite defenses should be adequate to deal with any Rebel fleet. Activate them!"

—The captain of the Star Destroyer *Tyranny* refuses an Imperial shipyard officer assistance

Antilles, in his modified CR90 corvette, the *Sundered Heart*, led four flanking corvettes to perform a hit-and-run raid on the orbital shipyards of the planet Kuat in order to lure the *Tyranny* from its new station at Fresia back to its usual station above Kuat. Imperial resistance at Kuat was light, and the Rebel corvettes easily defeated the defending TIE/LN starfighters and *Tartan*-class patrol cruisers. Many orbital resource containers were strewn about the half completed starships there, and the Rebel corvettes targeted the containers, which then exploded and destroyed the surrounding shipyards.

"Kuat Shipyard to all Imperial units! We are under siege by significant Rebel forces! All ships in the area, respond! Emergency Code Zero!"

—The Imperial commander at Kuat calling for reinforcements

The *Tyranny* originally refused several times to respond to distress calls from the shipyard's communications officer. When the Rebels destroyed the last shipyard, the officer activated Emergency Code Zero. In response, the *Tyranny* returned to Kuat to render aid to the Imperial defenders. The commander of the *Tyranny* allowed the Star Destroyer to come out of hyperspace with the shields down, giving the small Rebel raiding force a chance to damage the warship before escaping.

"The Tyranny and its fleet will most likely remain at their post while it is being repaired. The devastation of Kuat Shipyard should prove to be a lengthy distraction."

—Mon Mothma, after the battle

With the devastation of the Kuat shipyards and the damaging of the *Tyranny*, the Rebels believed that Fresia would be left unprotected, allowing them to raid the Incom facility.

Interpreting The Network

Pilot: *"Scanners show the Tyranny deployed numerous sentry drones just before it left for Kuat. The Fresian system is locked down!"*

Antilles: *"Blast! We'd have the entire Imperial fleet in our laps before we could blink!"*

C-3PO: *"Excuse me sir, but I believe Artoo could slice the Imperial station uplink on Wayland and register your ships. Then the Fresian sentries would clear you to the surface."*

—A Rebel pilot, Captain Antilles and C-3PO

The Alliance task force deployed in a forest clearing near the uplink station. R2, C-3PO and a small force of T2-B tanks and infantry prepared to take a path up to the uplink station. They needed to get in and out as quickly as possible. The preparation was critical to the outcome of the battle, as the Rebels could see the uplink station from their landing point. They began to map out a plan, as the Empire was alerted to their presence.

"But, sir, I think my presence there won't be necessary..."

"You can't come up with a plan and let someone else take the all the credit, Threepio."

—C-3PO and Captain Raymus Antilles discussing the upcoming Alliance operation.

Fighting followed the Rebel advance on the facility. R2-D2 plugged into the uplink station controls and began to steal the codes which would allow the Alliance Fleet to bypass the blockade around Fresia. This took some time, however, and the Empire had the opportunity to deploy additional forces. Soon a wave of three Stormtrooper squads and four AT-ST walkers landed to quash the Rebel force.

As another wave of three Stormtrooper squads and four AT-ST walkers landed, a final wave of Imperials, consisting of three TIE Maulers and a trio of Stormtrooper squads landed as well. The Rebels, surrounded by the Empire, began a last-ditch defensive effort to stop them, allowing R2-D2 to steal the codes from the uplink station. The Rebels then disengaged and departed Wayland under fire.

"With the sensors blind to our ships, we should be able to sneak right down to Fresia and grab those X-wings."

—Captain Antilles

The landing codes stolen from Wayland were accepted as valid by the Imperial forces in orbit around Fresia, allowing the Alliance to land a ground force on Fresia and mount an operation to liberate the X-wing prototypes. These starfighters would prove be a great boon to the Rebels that would continuously serve well throughout the rest of the Galactic Civil War.

Thest Of The X-Wing

When dissident Incom Corporation scientists provided the Alliance with the location of four prototype X-wing starfighters on Fresia, a Rebel task force was dispatched with the mission of retrieving them. Unanticipated complications arose when the *Imperial I*-class Star Destroyer *Tyranny* was discovered in orbit around the planet.

An operation had to be conducted to lure the *Tyranny* back to its station at the Kuat shipyards, resulting in a battle above the planet. Even after the success of that operation, the Alliance would still have an obstacle in getting to Fresia in the form of a defense network of sentry drones which were deployed by the *Tyranny* before it left the Fre'ji system. This final Imperial defensive measure would be circumvented when the Rebels were able to steal landing codes from an Imperial uplink station on Wayland. This was accomplished during the Battle of Wayland by a ground force escorting the droids R2-D2 and C-3PO. R2-D2 was able to register Alliance ships as attendees in the Incom nationalization ceremony. This allowed them to obtain clearance for landing upon reaching Fresia.

"There's no alarm on any Imperial comm channel. We're clear. Move out, team."

—Captain Raymus Antilles, upon reaching Fresia with the Alliance task force.

A convoy carrying Rebel pilots had to travel through the Imperial controlled territory around Fresia to reach the X-wing storage area. The ploy to register the ships at Wayland succeeded, and the Alliance task force was cleared for landing without having to engage the Imperial Navy in orbit.

"Time to retire those old Z-95s! These X-wings can handle anything the Empire can throw at us!"

—Captain Raymus Antilles

The Incom facility holding the X-wings was located on a sandy archipelago, and the Alliance task force deployed in the south. The Rebels quickly punched through the Imperial garrison, which was completely taken by surprise. A heavy turbolaser defended the facility approach from the southeast, but the Rebels were able to trek through shallow waters to the western entrance of the facility, which was much more lightly defended.

"I reached the X-wing; Beginning power up sequence... Abort! Abort launch sequence! I'm detecting anti-aircraft turrets all over the area!"

"They're going to get destroyed out there! Take out those anti-aircraft turrets!"

—A Rebel pilot and Captain Raymus Antilles, alarmed upon the discovery of some concealed anti-aircraft turrets during the Battle of Fresia.

After deploying more troops and calling in a Y-wing bombing run on the Imperial base, the Alliance launched a full attack. The base power generator was soon destroyed, after which the rest of the Imperial facility quickly followed suit, with an Imperial officer academy and command center also being destroyed. Also, a small force of tanks and infantry were deployed to defend the area between the turbolaser towers and the landing zone. As the Rebel pilots reached the location of the X-wing prototypes, a final effort was made by the Imperial forces to stop them with the landing of multiple AT-ST walkers and TIE maulers and the revealment of some previously hidden anti-aircraft turrets, but these reinforcements were quickly overwhelmed by the Rebel ground forces and the Rebel pilots were able to blast off from Fresia and escape along with the rest of the Rebel task force.

After the battle, Captain Antilles suggested to liberate Fresia and rid it of Imperial control. However, Mon Mothma countermanded this decision, stating that it would present too much of a target to the Empire and endanger the citizens of Fresia.

Kessel Rescue

"Those craft may help us but I fear for the citizens of Fresia and Incom's scientists. The Empire may make an example of them to keep other systems in line..."

—Mon Mothma

After the Battle of Fresia, in which the Rebel Alliance extracted 4 X-wing starfighter prototypes from an Imperial depot on Fresia, the Galactic Empire retaliated by taking a number of Incom scientists hostage. The Imperial convoy transporting the hostages passed through The Maw and prepared to land on Kessel to deliver the scientists to the infamous prisons.

"Transmissions we've intercepted indicated that many of the captured scientists will be transferred to Kessel. We will not leave them to die in the darkness of the spice mines."

—Mon Mothma briefing Captain Raymus Antilles on the Kessel operation.

The Rebels ambushed the Imperial Navy in a narrow corridor through an asteroid field. While the corvettes, frigates and starfighters engaged the Imperial ships in combat, the *Sundered Heart* and a team of Y-wings disabled the shuttles.

"If we can get to those shuttles during the transfer, we may be able to pull the prisoners right out from under the Empire's nose!"

—Captain Antilles

The Y-wings opened fire with their ion cannons, disabling the first transports. Moving quickly, the Sundered Heart docked with the shuttles. A small commando team boarded the shuttles and rescued the scientists. However, the Empire was determined to not allow the scientists to fall into Rebel hands, going so far as attempting to destroy the shuttles before they could be boarded. A call for reinforcements was issued by the Imperial commander, and two *Victory*-class Star Destroyers were detected entering the system.

As the last shuttle was boarded, the Imperial reinforcements finally arrived in the system and began to overwhelm the small Rebel force. With not a moment to lose, the Rebels cleared the asteroid field and jumped to lightspeed.

"The rescued Incom scientists have provided us with a wealth of scientific knowledge that will benefit all of the Rebellion. We are fortunate to have them on our side."

—Mon Mothma

The freed Incom scientists would later prove to be invaluable to the Alliance. Their schematics allowed the Rebellion to launch the production of X-wings.

Imperial Liberation

"The Empire is in a stir about events unfolding on Kashyyyk. It appears that Wookiees are being freed by a former Imperial soldier turned rogue smuggler."

—Mon Mothma^[src]

Some time prior to the Battle of Yavin, Chewbacca was captured by the Galactic Empire and was held in a prison camp on his homeworld of Kashyyyk. Han Solo traveled to Kashyyyk in order to rescue Chewbacca and, if possible, dozens of other Wookiees.

Learning the initiative of Han Solo, Mon Mothma sent troops on Kashyyyk to help him to liberate the Wookiees. The smuggler and the Rebel troops attacked each prison on Kashyyyk one at a time until they located which one held Chewbacca, inciting Wookiees to riot and join their cause along the way.

"I cannot believe that a smuggler would put himself at such great risk to help the Wookiees. You are truly a hero."

—Mon Mothma to Han Solo

Not wanting to lose an invaluable workforce for the Death Star, Darth Vader went to Kashyyyk and reinforced a pair of 74-Z speeder bike mounted scout troopers with a number of stormtroopers and vehicles, most notably TIE Maulers and All Terrain Scout Transports in order to repress the rebellion.

The Empire managed to crush the revolt and kill many Wookiees and Rebel forces. Furthermore, they were able to maintain their steady supply of Wookiee slaves to help construct the Death Star. Despite the Imperial victory, Han Solo and Chewbacca were able to escape, leaving Kashyyyk in the *Millennium Falcon*. A stormtrooper reported to a Field Commander. He informed his superior of Solo's escape, but told him that the Imperials had succeeded in wounding him. The commander told him to take up the possibility of locating him, saying Solo "must be made an example of."

Han Solo: *"I didn't do that for your Rebellion or your gratitude. I've got bills to pay."*

Mon Mothma: *"The Alliance is always in need of help, remember that if you ever find yourself out of work."*

Solo: *"Sorry, but I've got my own problems to worry about. If you have a job for me - one that pays - feel free to look me up. Until then, I'll stick with causes that are more... lucrative."*

—Han Solo and Mon Mothma

Highest Bidder

"My inquiries into this Imperial superweapon have put us in a dangerous situation. A pirate associate of ours has gone rogue, offering to sell information on the Alliance to Imperial command."

—Mon Mothma

A skirmish occurred at the planet Atzerri during the Galactic Civil War in which a pirate contact of the Rebel Alliance attempted to sell important Rebel military information to the Galactic Empire.

"That's what we get for dealing with those slimeballs. Those pirates would sell their own mothers out for a few credits!"

—Captain Raymus Antilles

The pirate, in his personal Interceptor frigate, fled to Atzerri, where he was to rendezvous with an Imperial fleet in the system. The Imperials decided to get the information from him without pay in a violent manner. They forced the pirate to surrender himself and prepare to be boarded.

"He has arranged a meeting with the Imperials near Atzerri. We must intercept that pirate before he can transfer the detailed information of our bases to the Empire."

—Mon Mothma

The Alliance Fleet entered the system. The strategy was for the larger warships to draw enemy fire, while squads of Y-wings opened fire on the Action VI transport with their ion cannons, allowing Raymus Antilles and a squad of soldiers to board.

The two fleets exchanged fire. A squadron of four Immobilizer 418 cruisers were activated, preventing the contact to escape.

A team of Y-wings did their job of disabling the transport. Immobilized, the *Sundered Heart* attached to the warship and Captain Antilles and a team of Rebel soldiers boarded. They apprehended the traitor.

The fleet prepared to jump hyperspace with the criminal, but the Immobilizers remained active. Raymus led a team of Y-wings to bomb the starships. The squad of Immobilizers were destroyed, allowing the Rebels to jump to hyperspace with the hostage.

Rescue The *Millennium Falcon*

"The captured pirate has divulged information he's gathered on this superweapon project. Grand Moff Tarkin is overseeing that project personally. We know where Tarkin was conducting research, but we risk a frontal assault on a fortified Imperial station."

—Mon Mothma

The captured pirate eventually revealed informations about the Imperial superweapon project. The Rebellion learnt that Grand Moff Wilhuff Tarkin was personally overseeing the project from a space station orbiting Corulag. But before attacking the station, the Rebels needed to find a way to disable the defenses of the station.

After Han Solo's success at rescuing Chewbacca and a number of Wookiees earlier on Kashyyyk, Mon Mothma strived to contact him to help the Rebellion's investigations. They eventually found him caught in a Star Destroyer's tractor beam over Corellia.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Rebel Alliance! Seeing as how you're all about helping people, how about lending me a hand? I've got some unwanted Imperial attention..."

—Han Solo

Mon Mothma: *"We will consider it payment for future services rendered."*

Han Solo: *"Payment? Well, I... okay, okay! Fine! Deal! Just get us out of here!"*

—Mon Mothma and Han Solo

The rebels sent a small fleet in the system to rescue him. While the Rebel fleet attacked the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyers, the Y-wings moved in to disable the tractor beam of the command Star Destroyer. They eventually managed to destroy it before it could reach the *Cardan*-class space station. The *Millennium Falcon* escaped and hyperspaced out of the system.

Needle In A Haystack

In order to retrieve more information about the new Imperial superweapon, the Alliance decided to attack one of Grand Moff Tarkin's research facilities.

"We have a mission for you, Captain Solo. Something that I feel is perfectly suited for someone with your particular... skills. We have an errand for you to run to Vergesso."

—Mon Mothma to Han Solo

The station in question was heavily defended, so Han Solo was tasked with infiltrating an Imperial cargo facility in the Vergesso Asteroids and attaching an EMP device to a container bound for Tarkin's station.

Mon Mothma: *"You're going to find a particular cargo container that is destined for an Imperial research facility, and place a device in it."*

Han Solo: *"This device wouldn't be of the explosive persuasion, would it?"*

—Mon Mothma and Han Solo

Han Solo and Chewbacca used the *Millennium Falcon* to scan the system. Their intention was to find a container that would be heading to Tarkin's research station.

At some point Boba Fett, in the *Slave I*, arrived in the system searching for Solo but the *Falcon* managed to escape him.

After destroying some TIE/LN starfighters on patrol, Han found the container and succeeded in placing the EMP device and left the system before any more Imperial reinforcements arrived.

"We've been tracking the cargo container, and the Empire has finally delivered it to the station at Corulag. The EMP device we've planted will be discovered soon, so time is critical. Hurry to Corulag and detonate the device. With the station's defenses taken offline, we can move in and raid the facility for information."

—Mon Mothma

After the *Millennium Falcon* left the system, the container and its new load was sent to Tarkin's research facility, in orbit of Corulag.

Borrowed Time

"We've been tracking the cargo container, and the Empire has finally delivered it to the station at Corulag. The EMP device we've planted will be discovered soon, so time is critical. Hurry to Corulag and detonate the device. With the station's defenses taken offline, we can move in and raid the facility for information."

—Mon Mothma

The tracking device revealed the station's location over Corulag, and then triggered the EMP and paralyzed Imperial security forces around the station, including Imperial starships. While Captain Antilles led a team to attack the stunned defenses, a group of Rebel troopers managed to penetrate the station in RM-09 Alliance shuttles. But the Imperial defenses quickly recovered their ability to fight. Meanwhile, Rebel soldiers were delayed in the station by the Imperial infantry. They eventually managed to recover valuable data, just when the Star Destroyers began to engage the Rebel fleet. The soldiers evacuated the station in their shuttles and jumped hyperspace, the rest of the fleet behind them

"The Mon Calamari we rescued was in Tarkin's service for some time and has a wealth of information. The name of this Imperial superweapon is the Death Star. We can only assume its purpose follows its name."

—Mon Mothma

"Our friend within the Senate is following her leads as we speak. She may be able to provide us detailed schematics of the Death Star, but will need a reliable captain for some "errands" that may put her at risk."

—Mon Mothma, to Captain Raymus Antilles

From the data collected, the team was able to confirm the name of the project—Death Star—and gain an idea of its destructive capabilities, but with no technical schematics detailed enough to reveal a weakness. Mon Mothma then instructed Leia Organa to begin intensified operations to gather relevant intelligence, and assigned Captain Antilles to her service aboard *Tantive IV*.

Personal Data Journal Entry #574, Tarkin recording

...

Lord Vader has been here for only a few days, and already Admiral Motti and General Tagge are complaining. What would the two of them like me to do, ask the Dark Lord to kindly leave? They must be mad! Besides, it will do the two of them good to feel a bit of fear. I could tell them that they have nothing to worry about as long as they do not cross Vader. While the Dark Lord does have ambitions, his longings are beyond the simple wants and understandings of men such as Motti and Tagge. Perhaps they are even beyond my own visions and desires. Who can truly understand a man like Vader, a man trapped within an armored suit and compelled by a mysterious Force that is as elusive as it is powerful?

But I digress. I must admit that I find the interplay between Motti and Vader amusing. One is a man of technology and tangible items, the other a man of arcane powers. Vader totally confounds Motti. The admiral hates the Dark Lord's "sorcerous ways," but cannot stand against Vader's unbending faith. Tagge, the more rational of my chief aides, tends to avoid the Dark Lord. He will complain to me when he feels Vader is out of earshot, but he will not challenge the Emperor's servant face to face. Perhaps that will help him survive. Motti, I fear, will not last much beyond the completion of the battle station if he does not learn to keep his opinions to himself.

Ackbar's Rescue

Ackbar was one of the first Mon Calamari enslaved by the Empire. A popular and well-respected leader from Coral City, Ackbar was assigned to the flagship of an Imperial fleet as an interpreter and personal servant.

To make a good impression, a fleet officer presented the Calamarian as a gift to Grand Moff Tarkin. Following the initial conquest of the planet, Tarkin left the subjugation of Calamari to others and returned home to oversee his territories; along with him went Ackbar. As an ever-observant slave, Ackbar learned much about the Empire and its military, knowing that one day this information would be useful. He learned about the Empire's theories of war, and listened to the reasons the Empire had to change to conform to the Emperor's grand plan. He also learned for the first time of the rebellion growing in the galaxy. But Tarkin wasn't worried by this rebellion; he just smiled and muttered threats of a new weapon that would make the Empire invincible.

Ackbar occasionally found himself in a position to examine secret military documents, and he devoted himself to learning all he could about Imperial strategy and tactics, hoping against hope that he'd be able to use it someday against the Empire. But always, the Empire's secret weapon haunted Ackbar; all he could learn was that this weapon could not only level a planet, but utterly destroy it.

Then came the word; they were to pack. A shuttle was to take them to the weapon of which Tarkin had hinted: a new battle station. While in transit, the

shuttle was attacked by an elite force of Rebels that had been sent to assassinate the Grand Moff.

A Star Destroyer came to Tarkin's aid and he escaped, but Ackbar was left behind. He fled with the Rebels. Devoting himself and his people to the cause of the Rebellion, Ackbar's unique knowledge of the Empire quickly made him an indispensable part of the Alliance.

Personal Data Journal Entry #612, Tarkin recording

...

With Lord Vader's unusual gifts of persuasion and motivation, we have completed the battle station ahead of schedule. Chief Lemelisk has been assigned to a new project. Using the plans from the Death Star, the Emperor has commissioned a series of new space platforms called Torpedo Spheres. However, I am keeping this fact a secret from even my most-trusted advisors. If no one knows that the Death Star is fully operational, then the word cannot leak out to the galaxy. The Emperor demands surprise, and I will comply.

Still, there have been a few unfortunate incidents lately that have caused me some concern.

First, on my way from the Governor's Palace on Eriadu to take command of the Death Star's first test flight, a group of rebels intercepted my shuttle and made an attempt on my life. Luckily, Admiral Motti's Star Destroyer appeared out of hyperspace and were able to scatter the assassins.

However, they did manage to make off with my servant. I will miss Ackbar. Losing a Mon Calamari is like losing a trusted pet. Second, I have arrived to find that spies have somehow managed to steal the technical plans for the Death Star. I am not worried. Bevel has constructed an invincible weapon. The plans will only prove that to any who have the ability to study them. However, the thieves must be captured so that a lesson can be made of them. No one robs from the Empire and lives to brag about the deed. I have been informed that Lord Vader himself has gone after the thieves. If he catches them, they will beg for death. I have seen what the Dark Lord can do to a living man. It is not at all pleasant.

No matter, for the time is at hand. It is time to test the Death Star, to reveal it to the galaxy. It is time for the fear to begin. It will start right here in Horuz system. I have ordered the superlaser to destroy the penal colony. After all, I cannot leave witnesses to our act of creation.

And now, let the Emperor's reign of fear begin!

The Farlander Papers

My life ended on Agamar and began again on the Rebel flagship Independence. I came up on a crowded shuttle soon after Mon Mothma delivered the speech that had so inspired me. Mon Mothma had already gone up in a different shuttle, but there were several members of the ship's crew as well as three other new recruits from Agamar. Lynia was there, sitting next to me. I suppose that I looked nervous.

"Don't worry," she said. "You'll be fine."

I turned and met her lavender eyes as steadily as I could. It was my first time off-planet, my first time in a starship, and my first time making a big decision in my life without my family to advise me.

"I'm not worried at all," I lied. "I just can't wait to get my hands on the controls of a starfighter."

She laughed, clearly seeing through my bravado, and then turned more serious. "There's no other task you think you could perform for the Alliance!" she asked. "Nothing other than flying one of those death traps!"

Death traps? What kind of talk was that? Feeling mocked and underestimated, I told her, "You wouldn't understand." My tone was surly. "Wouldn't I!" she bristled, her expression momentarily stricken. "If you're still around in a few weeks, come ask me about my brother."

I felt like a real fool. What I had thought was mockery was probably real concern. She obviously knew something more than I about starfighters and starfighter pilots. Still, I could not let her shake me. There was one, and only one, goal before me.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I didn't mean to snap. But I know what I'm here for."

She looked at me with a half smile that told me I was forgiven, but that she still harbored doubts. We sank into silence again.

I had never seen anything like it. The Mon Calamari vessel was huge. Our tiny shuttle floated next to it like a bitz bug next to a bantha. The strange organic shapes of the hull turned into elongated hemispheres when seen from this close. Here and there I saw long streaks of black - battle scars, I guessed.

I nearly missed my first sight of an X-wing. It flashed by our shuttle, and I caught just a glimpse of it through the viewport. How can I describe that moment? For a boy whose ideas of power and speed had been embodied in a maxed-out landspeeder, this was pure poetry. The X-wing moved like a bird of prey, its S-foil wings glinting in the burning light of the sun, cleaving the emptiness of space silently and with deadly grace. Then it was gone, and I spent the rest of the shuttle ride searching for another.

I saw no more X-wings that day. but I had plenty to occupy my attention. The shuttle docked in a huge airlock near the rear of the Calamarian vessel. At least I assumed that it was the rear. The Calamarian design was unlike anything I had seen, but I think that I spotted the engine housings just before we entered the lock.

As we disembarked. Lynia hesitated and then said. "Good luck. I'll look you up in a few days. Just to see how you're doing." Before I could think of anything else to say, she was gone.

We were in a shuttle bay, and dozens of shuttles of different sizes were there. I looked hopefully for another glimpse of a starfighter, but there were none.

"New recruits from Agamar." boomed a basso voice. "Please report to me. Gart! Poussan! Jan-lo! Farlander!"

I jumped at the sound of my name. Somehow, hearing it spoken in this strange place made the reality, and finality, of my decision solidify in my mind. This wasn't a dream. I was really here!

The source of the voice turned out to be a short alien creature with large, nocturnal eyes, gray-green skin, and a puzzled-looking expression seemingly

indigenous to its face. It was dressed in a military uniform and blinked every few seconds. After the creature had assured itself that we were all present, it set out briskly toward a far wall. I followed with the other new recruits as we trekked through the gigantic hangar. There were luminous arrows in the floor, and we seemed to be following them.

A crosshatch of structural beams arched overhead, layer on layer of flattened ribbon-like constructions that formed the outer shell of the Independence. I had never seen anything built like this and had no idea even what the building material was. Nothing was square or at right angles. It was a little disorienting. It looked incredibly strong, though.

The luminous arrows led us to an iris that opened when we approached. On the other side was a long, well-lit hallway, wide enough to accommodate at least five people abreast. Iris doors lined the hallway, and unfamiliar devices studded the walls, but our guide continued without allowing us time to examine these Calamarian wonders.

There was plenty of activity around us, and I guessed that we were in one of the main routes through this part of the ship. I saw many humans, of course, but I also spotted a variety of nonhumans and droids - most of them completely unfamiliar to me. The hallway was anything but straight, curving first to the right for a while and then back again to the left. I judged that we were taking a serpentine route toward the center of the cruiser.

After about ten minutes of nonstop marching, we came upon a smaller hallway, a tributary to this main stream. After another minute or two, we were delivered into a small room containing nothing but a table, ten chairs, and a couple of plaques on one wall. Our guide said, "Wait here," and left us.

"What do you think will happen now!" asked one of the others. He was a tall, thin young man with reddish hair and small, slit-like eyes. He had fidgeted on the shuttle and was obviously having trouble staying calm. His name was 'Ndranth Poussan, I think. I had spoken to him once before, on Agamar, but I hardly knew him.

"We wait," answered another of the Agamarians. Sunnar Jan-lo was a strong, committed member of the Resistance. Solidly built, decisive and energetic, Jan-

lo had always been a leader on Agamar. She had said nothing during the long shuttle ride. Now her comment was characteristically short and to the point. She sat at the table and motioned for Poussan and Breth Gart, the other recruit, to sit also.

I had wandered over to examine the plaques on the far wall. One listed the crimes of the Emperor. It was the same list I had seen in the booklet *A Call To Reason*. The other plaque was a laser-paper version of the Formal Declaration of Rebellion. It read much like Mon Mothma's speech, and I wondered whether she had been its author.

I was just finishing reading when I heard the hiss of a door opening. I turned in time to see an odd quartet of Rebel officers enter the room. Two were human; the other two were like nothing I had ever seen. One was a salmon-colored creature with a high, domed head featuring large eyes set to either side. I was to learn later that he was a Calamarian - a member of the race who had built this starship. The other officer was even stranger to my unaccustomed eyes. His face looked much like some aquatic creature from my home world. The image that came to mind, in fact, was of a creature with a squid for a head. Ironically, I was to learn later that these creatures, called Quarren, were sometimes referred to as Squid Heads. After I had come to know them, however, I found that appellation distasteful.

The Quarren officer called my name in a sibilant voice. "Follow me, please," he said in strongly accented Basic. Hesitantly, I fell in behind him.

We walked down another hallway and into an elevator of some kind. As we rode down to the lower decks, I kept sneaking glances at this strange specimen beside me.

Finally, we emerged from the elevator into a dark, narrow hallway. The lighting was distinctly more dim than that of the upper decks, but my guide seemed right at home. I later learned that Quarrens evolved from deep in the seas of Mon Calamari, and that they preferred low light. The section of the ship I had been assigned to was a still-unmodified Quarren area.

The Quarren stopped before a doorway and gestured in a very humanlike way.

"This is cabin 11489, your new home, Flight Cadet Farlander," he said. I didn't respond immediately, but stood there, a little frozen by the implications of his statement, still fascinated with his alien looks, and, I'm afraid, staring foolishly at him.

"First time off-planet!" he half asked, half stated. "Imagine what your face looks like to me." The sound he made was something like a drainpipe backing up, and I found myself hoping that it was his species' version of a chuckle. If that was the case, I wanted to avoid being so amusing as to provoke a full-on belly laugh.

"I... I'm so..." I tried to apologize, hoping to salvage some dignity.

"Here," he interrupted. "Take this holo disk and study it." The Quarren reached out a suckered limb and proffered a standard holo. I reached for it. The sucker released it as my hand closed on the small disk. "If you're to be a starfighter pilot, you need to learn the ropes. If you have any questions, your liaison will be Lt. Hamo Blastwell. Don't worry. He's a human."

The sound of a gurgling drainpipe echoed down the small hallway as the Quarren turned and walked away. I stood a moment, chagrined and afraid that I had made a bad first impression; then, with a sigh of resignation, I retreated into the small room that was to be my temporary home.

It wasn't much: a small desk and chair with an antiquated personal holo deck; a tiny holo wall with a limited selection of topics; a tiny privy (apparently set up for human needs, with a few extra nozzles and buttons I didn't dare touch); a simple cot that came out of the wall at the touch of a button. That was all.

I had brought very little with me on this journey. Most of my possessions had been destroyed during the Imperial attack, so I carried only a few clothes and personal items. I had nothing much to do and didn't dare leave my cabin, fearing that I would get lost among the tunnels and hallways of this huge ship. I popped the holo disk into the deck and started my education as a starfighter pilot.

HISTORICAL SIMULATOR

RESCUE AT MON CALAMARI

In the early days of the Rebellion, there was no fleet of ships such as we have now. There were only a handful of dedicated people nursing a pitiful few starfighters and converted freighters. We desperately needed the help of a major space-faring race. One such race, the Calamarians, were still neutral. They had not yet seen that the Empire intended their destruction. They were not yet aware of the Empire's appetite for evil.

When Imperial forces arrived at Mon Calamari, they found a peaceful world and a cooperative population. To the Empire, peaceful meant stupid and cooperative meant ripe for plucking. The Imperials took full advantage, exploiting Mon Calamari's industries and taking the Calamarians as slaves.

The leaders of the Rebellion had been interested in the beings of Mon Calamari for some time, and they became aware of the Imperial atrocities perhaps before most of the Calamarians themselves. Imperial convoys were starting to load huge bulk freighters with slaves. These freighters were never designed to carry life forms, and the conditions within the freighters were brutal, overcrowded, and demeaning. When the Rebel leaders learned of this, they saw their opportunity to help the Calamarians and, at the same time, hopefully secure their cooperation against the Empire.

A group of Bulk Freighters-some carrying Mon Calamari slaves, others carrying war materiel for the Empire-were scheduled to rendezvous in the Mon Calamari system, awaiting the arrival of a Star Destroyer. The Bulk Freighters were protected by a great horde of TIE fighters while Space Tugs hauled Space Containers among the Freighters. Intelligence of this rendezvous reached the leaders of the Rebellion, and they planned a strike mission to intercept and retrieve the containers and rescue the Calamarians.

The mission required that X-wings and Y-wings hyperspace into the area. While the Y-wings; disabled the Bulk Freighters to prevent their escaping, the X-wings were to engage the TIE fighters and prevent them from interfering with the Y-wings. Once the situation was controlled, an Alliance Bulk Freighter would hyperspace into the area to retrieve the captured containers, all before the

Star Destroyer arrived. During! the mission, one particularly daring X-wing pilot played an important role. In the simulator, you will reenact his exploits.

The X-wings and Y-wings hyperspaced in as planned and immediately the Y-wings began disabling the Freighters. The TIE fighters, not expecting any trouble, were slightly out of position, so at first the X-wings were able to keep them away from the battle with the Freighters.

Eventually, the TIE fighters were simply too numerous to be contained completely. Although the X-wing pilots destroyed or disabled many, they were outnumbered almost three to one. Eventually several flights of TIE fighters disengaged and headed for the Freighters. Instead of attacking the Y-wings, however, they focused their attack on the containers themselves. Typically, they would rather massacre thousands of innocent beings than let them fall into the hands of the enemy!

Halley Kadorto followed the TIE fighters as they headed toward the first of the helpless containers. Though he called to his squadron for help, all the other pilots were engaged. Kadorto was forced to work alone. His skill and superior shooting completely routed the TIE fighters, sending those who survived scurrying back among their remaining cohorts. For his efforts, Halley Kadorto received the Kalidor Crescent.

Ultimately, the rest of the TIEs were routed and the operation was carried off as planned. The grateful Calamarians recognized the friendship of the Rebels, and began almost immediately providing them with ships. Today the most powerful spacecraft in the Alliance fleet are provided by the Mon Calamari, who remain among our staunchest allies.

You must take the role of Halley Kadorto, engaging the TIE fighters in a life or death struggle. You will be at the controls of a . . .

...Keyan was studying the historical missions for the third time when he felt the presence of someone watching him. He was about to look behind him when the being spoke. "Excuse me. Are you busy?"

Keyan whirled to face the speaker and discovered a young man-human and by his appearance, only a few years older than Keyan himself. The man wore a Rebel uniform with a Lieutenant's insignia, but something in his manner contradicted his superior rank. His dark blonde hair was shaggy, as if he hadn't had a haircut in several months, and his uniform was unbuttoned at the collar. The man leaned against the entry to Keyan's cubicle, smiling as he in turn studied Keyan. After a moment, he spoke again. "Some of the crew around here call me Lieutenant Blastwell. But you can call me Hamo. I thought you might like to get a bite to eat."

That was two days ago. Now he and Hamo had become good friends. From similar outpost worlds, their personal histories were remarkably alike. Almost from the beginning, Keyan had liked Hamo. The biggest difference between them was that Hamo had been with the Alliance for nearly a year now, and he was a wing leader and expert X-wing pilot. It was with Hamo that Keyan hoped to learn to be a starfighter ace. For the past two days Hamo had kept Keyan spellbound with his stories of space battles-heroic maneuvers, triumphs, tragedies, near misses, and close calls. He had also helped Keyan through his first simulator trials, preparing him for the "Maze."

Now they stood near one of the open viewports in the upper decks and enjoyed their first view of Mon Calamari, home base of the Calamarian Star Fleet. The ship had come out of hyperspace and was approaching the water world at sub-light speed. Earlier, a fast shuttle had approached the ship, arriving almost as soon as they had left hyperspace. Keyan had caught a quick glimpse of it before it disappeared, moving gracefully toward the airlock in the ship's belly. But Keyan had already forgotten the shuttle craft. Once they established orbit, Keyan knew his real training would begin. He couldn't wait to get behind the controls of a starfighter and at least make it through the "Maze."

Elsewhere in the ship, in a secure meeting room, four people were deep in conference-Mon Mothma, Admiral Ackbar, General Dodonna, and General Madine. Madine was speaking.

"Our intelligence tells us that an Imperial transport vessel, probably a Corellian Corvette, will be en route to Celanon City in two weeks. It will make one stop near Turkana in the Hadar Sector. My informant believes it will have some very important information on board." The General paused a moment. "Or it may be an important passenger. We're really not sure. But elaborate precautions are being taken to make this transport seem unimportant. It will be traveling without a substantial escort, hoping to avoid attention. It is also supposed to be carrying a skeleton crew. We feel that this is an opportunity of some significance."

"How so?" asked Admiral Ackbar.

"First, Turkana is a small outpost. There is no major Imperial installation there. We should be able to board this ship. Nobody will be expecting such an attack. Second . . . Well, we know from our informants that Lord Vader is on the move." The general paused nervously a moment, the evil name seeming to stick in his throat as he uttered it. "He may be the passenger aboard this vessel."

The Calamarian turned to Mon Mothma momentarily, then focused his great luminous eyes on the human general. "What do you need to carry out the operation?"

Madine did not hesitate. "I need two squadrons of X-wings, one of Y-wings equipped with ion cannons, and a Nebulon B Frigate to act as a decoy-to lure off any escort the Corvette might have-and one of our 'liberated' Stormtrooper transports, with R2 units on board. Needless to say, I'll need some of our best commandos if it's really Vader."

"We have other operations going on as well. I will try to find the equipment you require. Jan?"

"We can get the starfighters," answered the bearded general in charge of Starfighter Command. "However, we have very few trained pilots. We have had many losses recently."

The Calamarian admiral was silent a moment. "Try," was all he said.

"You are convinced this is genuine information?" asked Mon Mothma, directing her question at Madine.

"Our intelligence reveals that something of critical value will be on board. Several of our operatives risked blowing their cover to get the information to us. They would not have done so under ordinary circumstances."

"Then I shall do all I can to help," interrupted Ackbar.

"And I," echoed Dodonna

The Pilot Proving Ground (THE MAZE)

I was sent to a secret training area the next morning. I have no idea where it was. and I'm sure that it isn't there anymore. Rebel facilities have a way of changing locations frequently, for obvious reasons.

The Maze was a series of gates and targets designed to familiarize pilots with the basic operation of their craft. I spent two days flying the Maze and learning how to manage different starfighters.

There was no real danger. The Maze is designed so that nothing you do can really hurt you. The damage is simulated. But the effect is real enough. My shoulders ached after the first few hours of concentrated effort. I did pretty well my first run, but Hamo flew up next to me as I ran out of time and told me to keep trying.

Eventually I got the knack of flying the Maze and could keep going all the way past the eight main levels. On the third day of training, we all realized that I couldn't really learn anything more from the Maze. Next stop: the simulators!

Meeting Halley Kadorto

It happened after my first day on the historical simulators. I was in the mess hall. Hamo was away on some mission he couldn't talk about, so I was eating alone. I found a table that was practically empty. I had decided to think about the day's events for a few minutes while I ate.

The only other occupant of the large table was an older man dressed in civilian clothes. At first, I was going to sit at the far end of the table, but something prompted me to sit nearer the old man.

"Starfighter cadet!" he asked as I sat down.

"Yes, sir. Keyan Farlander. Just joined up... at Agamar."

"Ahh. Agamar. I was there once. Nice planet," the man said. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Kadorto. Halley Kadorto."

I must have looked like a stunned hoska, because he laughed and nodded his head.

"That's right. I'm the one from the simulators. You flown my mission yet!"

"Yessir. I did it today, as a matter of fact."

"The key, you know, is identifying the containers with the slaves. I was lucky. We knew something was up around Mon Calamari, but we never suspected the Imperial scum would actually try to destroy the slave containers before we could get there. I saw the TIEs zeroing in on the distant containers and took off to see what they were up to. I wasn't following orders. Instinct, maybe. Luck. Doesn't matter much, does it!"

I didn't know what to say, so I just smiled knowingly.

"I've been shot up a lot of times. In the early days, our ships were prone to fail on us. You don't have that in the simulators. They're better these days, but back then... I was technically dead three or four times, but the medical droids always brought me back.

"That day, I was sharp. I flew circles around those TIE bastards and shot them all to hell. By the time reinforcements arrived, well... there wasn't much left. It was a proud day, young Farlander, but I flew a lot of missions before and after that one, and every one of them was just as important. Remember that. Don't let up for an instant, or you'll be staring into the ugly face of one of those medical droids - if you're lucky!"

I was still sitting with Halley Kadorto when Hamo suddenly appeared in the mess. He seemed to be in a hurry. When he spotted me, he came directly over to the table.

"Come on, Farlander. There's a call for volunteers to fly a very important mission. They need more pilots, and I volunteered you."

Many people have already heard the story of my first mission. It became the subject of general conversation on the Independence after I returned. Perhaps much has been made of it - it being my first mission and all - but I figure that I was just lucky, in spite of what Mon Mothma told me after my promotion.

Reluctantly I followed Hamo to a briefing room. By this time, I had a better idea about how things worked on board, but I was pretty surprised to see Mon Mothma and Admiral Ackbar heading up the briefing. The admiral began speaking soon after we arrived.

"The Frigate will pop in here." The Calamarian was pointing to a spot in the holo projection. A label indicated that it was a quadrant of the Hadar sector. A Corellian corvette filled the lower corner of the projection. A small world was visible in the background. As the admiral spoke, a Nebulon-B Frigate popped into view in the upper quadrant. Within moments, a stream of TIE fighters appeared and headed directly for the Frigate. Then a squadron of X-wings appeared behind the TIE fighters, catching them in a cross fire between their guns and the Frigate's. The second X-wing squadron and the Y-wings surrounded the corvette.

"Blue Squadron will flank the enemy fighters, catching them in a crossfire with the Calamarian Frigate Liberator. Red Squadron will protect the Storm Unit as it attempts to board the corvette Talon. The Y-wings of Gold Squadron will use their ion cannons to disable the corvette's weapons and electricals. If Blue Squadron is successful, there should be limited resistance; but Red Squadron, your job is to protect the Y-wings and the Storm Unit.

"When the Storm Unit successfully boards the Talon, the commandos will make their way to the captain's quarters and to the bridge. They will confiscate all available holos and capture any senior ranking officers. In addition, R2 units

will scan the corvette's computer system and retrieve anything found there. Are there any questions!"

Captain Charger, one of our senior officers, stood up and asked, "Do we take the corvette when we leave, destroy it, or abandon it!"

The admiral was quick to answer. "Carry out the mission objectives and retreat immediately. We want as few casualties on this mission as possible. And we don't want any complications. Just hit hard, hit fast, and get out!"

When assignments were made, Hamo was assigned to Red Squadron. He volunteered me as his wingman. I kept asking myself what I was doing here. I asked Hamo the same question.

"There are a lot of ops going on right now," he replied later, as we made our way back to our quarters. "They're short on pilots." He grinned and added, "So you're elected."

Ready or not, Empire, here I come. This was what I had joined the Alliance for, after all. I just hoped I made it back.

"Don't worry," Hamo told me, for the hundredth time, it seemed. "You'll be fine."

We had a few days before the mission, and Hamo yanked me from my normal training schedule to drill me in X-wing maneuvers and get me some real flight time. It was perhaps the most exciting time of my life. It would have been fun too, if I could have forgotten what lay ahead. But every time I questioned my abilities, Hamo would reassure me, and slowly I gained confidence in myself. The X-wing did feel much like a T-16 - only better.

The day arrived. We strapped in and did our instrument checkouts. Then the tractor beams floated us from the hangar and into space. It wasn't the first time I had seen the black, infinite canvas of space from inside an X-wing, but it was the first time I was going to hyperspace into battle. My stomach was queasy, and I could hardly maintain my focus on the equipment and the readouts from the console before me.

"You OK, Red Two!" It was Hamo, checking in.

"Fine," I answered, not entirely truthfully. "I'm fine." I struggled to gain control, taking deep breaths and letting them out slowly. Gradually, I put aside all fear of the future and concentrated on handling my starfighter. My starfighter, I thought. I was finally ready for action. "I'm ready," I breathed into my communicator.

"What's that, Red Two!" came Hamo's reply.

"Nothing, Red Leader. Ready when you are," I answered, this time with some conviction.

"Just stick close to me," he replied. "Hyperspace in T-minus 15."

I had been in hyperspace a few times by now. but I never got used to the feeling of losing my reference points. I could feel my body's anchor in the real world literally rip away. I could sense myself receding from my known point in space and heading for another. When I described this feeling to others, they all looked at me blankly or implied that it was just my imagination - except for one Sullustan navigator who said nothing, but nodded sagely and offered what passed for a smile among Sullustans.

This eerie sensation was all the more intense when it was just me and the X-wing alone in limbo. Fortunately, it didn't last long. We came out a few clicks from a raging battle.

There was a slight pressure change. Faint static played over the comlink. And off in the distance, laser bursts flashed and ships were disintegrating in iridescent blues, greens, and violets against the backdrop of a distant galaxy. In that surreal moment, I think I formed an image of space battle that would forever haunt me: contradictory visions of beauty and death; of graceful, weightless dancing; and awesome, destructive power.

All this in a heartbeat.

I found myself pulling hard on the controls and spinning into an approach position, the enemy corvette filling my view screen. I could see Hamo's X-wing just ahead of me, and I adjusted to match his trajectory. I pushed too hard! Suddenly I lost him, spinning off course as I tried to compensate. In a speeding X-wing, a small miscalculation can really throw you off.

Angry at myself for making this stupid error, I started to come around again when I spotted two TIE fighters speeding in my direction. A quick mental calculation told me that they were headed straight for Hamo's X-wing!

I swung in behind the closer of the two. He had almost lined up with Hamo already. "Watch out, Red Leader," I yelled as I punched the fire button. My hand wasn't steady, and my aim was off, but one of the quad-linked lasers hit the TIE on the side panel just before his green lasers squirted out at Hamo. I could see the TIE slew sideways, and his shot went wide, a single beam just clipping the back of Hamo's X-wing.

I kept the TIE fighter in my sights and closed in to finish him off. It all happened so fast; I was flying on instinct. I noticed that the TIE seemed to be circling to starboard. Later I realized that his steering was probably damaged, but at the time, I just took an angle inside his turn and fired a couple of dual-linked blasts. The second one hit him amidships, and the small TIE fighter lit up with electrical sparks and careened off course, spinning out of control. A moment later, the ship exploded, sending pieces flying in all directions.

"Good shooting, Red Two." It was Hamo on the comm. "And thanks. But next time, watch out for the wingman. I barely got him off your tail."

The wingman! I had forgotten about him as I concentrated on the TIE in front. If it hadn't been for Hamo acting as my wingman, I would have been dead meat.

"Red Two, come in."

"I'm here, Red Leader. I'm OK, I guess."

"Hey kid, that was good shooting. You'll be all right. But listen. I'm afraid I've been damaged. It's not too severe, but my R2 has been disabled. I won't be able to return to base - no hyperspace, you know - unless I can dock with the Liberator. I'm leaving the fight to you, Red Two. I'm joining Blue Squadron. You're on your own. You copy!"

"Sh... shouldn't I stay with you, Red Leader!" I asked. I didn't know whether to be scared, angry. or flattered that Hamo was going to leave me to fend for myself. Angry and scared were top contenders, however.

"Negative. Complete the mission. Hurry now, or you'll miss all the fun." The comm clicked off and then on again. "Good luck, Keyan."

"Thank you, sir. Same to you" I answered dubiously.

"Hey, kid. Don't worry. Just keep your wits about you. You're a natural, you know."

Then Hamo's X-wing banked and flew out of view. I was headed for the Talon. Staying on course, I watched the Y-wings firing ion blasts at specific locations, trying to penetrate the corvette's shields. Other X-wings from Red Squadron were helping by targeting the active guns.

I began weaving my way around the laser shots, heading in toward one of the gun emplacements. So far, it wasn't much different from the simulation drills. If you kept moving, the ship's lasers couldn't home in on you. Then a call came over the comm.

"Storm Leader to all units. Any of you X-wing jockeys got a spare R2? We need help here at the main airlock. Come in..."

"Red Leader to Red Two. You hear that? Go on in, boy. Give the commandos a hand." Hamo was still watching out for me.

"Acknowledged," I called. "Red Two to Storm Leader. Where's the air lock? Come in, Storm Leader."

"This is Storm Leader. Red Two, come in along the belly, aft of amidships. You'll see our boarding craft jamming the hatch. You should be able to squeeze your X-wing around it. We'll meet you in the landing bay."

"I'm on my way, Storm Leader," I told him. I finished my pass at the gun emplacement, squeezing off three or four shots before I veered around the edge of the corvette and circled under it.

The boarding craft was smoking, so it was easy to spot. I pulled up to the air lock, slowing my engines nearly to zero, and drifted past the boarding craft. I could see a gaping hole in the hull, and smoking fumes from burning metal poured out into the vacuum.

As I eased out of the cockpit, assault troopers began removing my R2 unit from its socket in the X-wing. I climbed down and saluted the officers who approached me.

"We've finally got this section secured," one of them told me. "We're trying to jam their gun computers. A few of the others have already gone forward to find the bridge."

"What should I do!" I asked. I hadn't planned on boarding the Talon, although I had been briefed on some basics of the ship's layout.

"Take your R2 forward and see if you can help us jam the guns. This section has been cut off from the main defense computers. And while you're there, get anything that looks important and get back here. You've got 15 minutes."

Now I know that if I had thought about it much, I would have been scared to death. I was scared, I'll admit that. But I was also excited. This was an adventure beyond even my own youthful daydreams. I forged ahead, the R2 guiding me with its characteristic beeps, pops, whines, and sproings. I didn't know what any of it meant, but the intent was generally to turn one way or the other at an intersection, and I got the idea quickly enough.

The corridors were mostly empty. Here and there, we passed the bodies of Imperial stormtroopers and Rebel assault commandos where heavy battles had apparently taken place. A few commandos passed, going in the opposite direction or moving down side corridors. We had been told that this ship would be lightly defended, but the evidence suggested otherwise.

The air was filled with an acrid smell. Blaster burn? The sight of the bodies deflated my excitement, but my R2 unit didn't seem to notice. I hurried to keep up.

The stormtrooper was waiting, his blaster pointed directly in my face as I hurried around a corner. Fortunately for me, I think that he was almost as surprised as I was. He probably didn't expect anyone to blunder into him like that. Whatever the reason, he didn't shoot quickly enough, and I slashed upward with my arm, knocking the blaster from his gloved hand. A sharp pain lanced through my wrist as it contacted the hard ceramic armor, and my own

blaster fell from my grip as I instinctively grabbed the painful area. The stormtrooper reached out and took me by the throat.

He pushed me down on my back, my own blaster trapped beneath me, poking uselessly into my spine through the flight suit. I couldn't breathe, and I had no weapon. Fists were pretty useless against ceramic armor, and, although I tried to break his grip on my throat, I could do nothing. My vision was beginning to dim as I ran out of air. I was on the verge of unconsciousness.

Then the stormtrooper shuddered violently, went stiff, and fell off me. His hands released their death grip, and I inhaled a deep, gasping breath. Next to the stormtrooper, who appeared to be dead or unconscious, my R2 unit was retracting a half-meter-long shock probe.

Now I had never heard of a droid attacking a human like that, but I wasn't about to question it just then. All I could think of was that perhaps shocking the trooper wasn't technically harming him, just immobilizing him. Or perhaps someone had tinkered with this one. Or maybe it had been mistreated by stormtroopers. Whatever the reason, it was clear that this apparently simple R2 unit was more than just a navigation droid. It was also a loyal companion.

"Thanks, R2," I said, when I had caught my breath again. The droid beeped a contented sound, or at least that's how I interpreted it. I got to my feet and ran onward.

When I reached the bridge, it was a wreck. I quickly spotted roughly ten dead stormtroopers and at least half that many Rebel commandos. But now the place was deserted. I began to search for anything that might be useful while the R2 linked with the command computer, first shutting down any external guns that were still active and then downloading information from the ship's memory banks.

I found nothing that looked important and was about to give up when I heard the muffled sound of a blaster being fired nearby. It came from behind a wall with no apparent doorway, but it was unmistakably the sound of a blaster. I suspected that there must be a doorway, even if I couldn't see it.

"R2!"

"Beep... pop!" it answered. Or something like that.

"I think there's a door or something over on that wall," I said. "Can you open it!"

The droid whistled a few more times, and then the entire wall slid aside, revealing a secret room. Inside, burning holo disks were everywhere. An older man in an Imperial officer's uniform stood behind a large desk, his expression that of someone caught in the act. He held a blaster pointed roughly in my direction. When he saw me, he raised the blaster and fired. A heartbeat later, I fired my own blaster, hitting him square in the chest. He crumpled and fell behind the great desk.

It was only after I had fired that I realized two things. First, I was still alive - in fact, I hadn't even been hit. Second, he hadn't been aiming at me. His blaster had been aimed at another pile of holo disks on the desk between him and me.

I ran cautiously over to see what had happened to him. It was immediately obvious that he was dead, his face frozen in a rictus of surprise. I felt weak. I had just killed a man, face to face. And he hadn't even been shooting at me. I felt momentarily dizzy and had to clutch the edge of the desk to keep from falling. I had never killed a man before.

I realized suddenly that this was, in fact, the second man I had killed, the first being the pilot of the TIE fighter I had shot. Was it more noble or acceptable to shoot an enemy pilot, or to shoot an officer in cold blood? I found myself wondering what could be in these disks that he had thought was worth dying for.

I regained my composure and remembered that the commando in the air lock had given me 15 minutes. I didn't have much time left. I gathered all the holos I could find. Some were still undamaged; others were little more than slag, but I took them all and stuffed them into the pockets of my flight suit.

I took a last look at the man I had shot, and, as an afterthought, I took his ID badge. Perhaps it would be useful to know who he had been. I knew that I would never forget him.

"Come on, R2. I think we got what we came for," I said after taking a deep breath. "Let's get out of here."

I ran from the bridge, followed by the R2 unit, who was emitting a solid stream of high-pitched whistles, pops, and sproings. I made my way back to the air lock and took off in my X-wing as soon as it was ready, saluting the commandos who were beginning their own evacuation.

"R2!" I called over the comm. "Space us out of here. Let's go home."

Alliance Flagship: Yavin Base

"Mon Mothma, this is Flight Officer Keyan. He's the one who captured the holos. I'm told he distinguished himself in the battle as well." Admiral Ackbar himself beckoned him to approach.

Mon Mothma studied Keyan's face, as if searching his character. "Have we met before?" she asked finally.

"I was on Agamar," Keyan answered.

"Agamar? I was there only two weeks ago . . . You've wasted no time, have you?"

"Yes Ma'am! I mean, no Ma'am. I mean ..."

Mon Mothma smiled warmly. "Let me show you what your heroism has recovered for us. It's an Imperial Military Specifications report. Ultra Top Secret. Much of it is missing, but what's here is invaluable to us. It details their own ships' weaponry and capabilities, but also describes our ships as they view them. And there are hints of other things. Dark plans. You have no idea how precious this information is. I'm going to give you a printout to study. You've earned it."

"Excuse me Ma'am," ventured Keyan, "was that the information we were after?"

A strange look passed between Mon Mothma and Ackbar. Some message or meaning was exchanged, of that Keyan was certain, but he had no idea what it

was all about. But the admiral looked at him with those gigantic eyes, which could seem, in the same moment, compassionate, confused, perceptive, naive, and penetrating. Keyan found them disconcerting.

"Yours was a very important mission, Flight Officer," the Calamarian said in a surprisingly low, sibilant voice. "However our main target was probably far away in another sector. We do not know if any of our other missions were successful. Not yet, at any rate. We remain hopeful.

"Your mission became entangled in an elaborate Imperial plan of deception and misdirection. The Empire has been sending out numerous transports whose sole purpose is to confuse us. Some carry genuine information. Others are worthless decoys. We have no way of knowing for sure which is which, though we based your mission on good intelligence. Our ultimate goal is to find the transport we believe may carry Darth Vader on a secret mission. We must try to capture him. Or kill him. We do not yet know if we have been successful."

"However, the information you have given us is an added victory for the Alliance. You should be proud to know how well you and your fellow pilots have served."

Keyan was silent, stunned. So many had died-for a mission that could well have been worthless! It was inconceivable. "Then all those deaths . . . Isn't it too big a risk to take?" he finally blurted out.

"No!" exclaimed the Chief of State. "Every battle is significant. Yes, your mission entailed some risks. But we were lucky this time, and the information in this report could ultimately help save billions of lives. In war there are many sacrifices. None are minor or without significance. Even now as we await word from the other missions, we do not belittle what you and your colleagues have accomplished. Nor should you. Here, read the hob-printout and see what you've brought us. Return here when you have finished."

Later, when Keyan was alone, he studied the papers Mon Mothma had handed him. They were labeled Top Secret. He read it all, slowly. Then he read it again.

When Keyan had finished reading the documents he had recovered from the Blockade Runner, he returned to Mon Mothma's office as directed. An aide

told him that the C-in-C was not in, but that she could be found in Lecture Hall C, deck 5.

Not being very familiar with the layout of the ship after only two weeks, Keyan got lost several times while trying to find Lecture Hall C. So it is perhaps understandable that he was less than observant as the doorway irised open and he entered the lecture hall. He failed to see any significance to the fact that the room was full of pilots and crewmembers of Starfighter Command, and that Mon Mothma, General Dodonna, and even Admiral Ackbar himself stood on a raised platform at the back of the room.

Keyan was halfway up the aisle when he realized that everyone was staring at him.

Embarrassed, he slowed down to a cautious pace, but General Dodonna called to him in a deep voice that resonated naturally through the hall.

"Don't stop, Lieutenant Farlander. This party's for you."

But Keyan did stop. Did he say Lieutenant? He must have looked comical in his surprise, as he suddenly became aware that he had walked into some ceremony or other. Whatever the reason, everyone in the room burst into laughter, and Keyan felt the heat of chagrin on his cheeks. But Mon Mothma was beckoning him to the dais, and suddenly he found himself laughing, too. Lieutenant Farlander. It had a good ring to it.

"There are many heroes among us. We want to welcome one more." Mon Mothma was speaking as Keyan made his way up to the small stage. "Keyan Farlander came to us, like many others before him, with a conviction that the Empire must be destroyed. But like many of you before you joined the Alliance, he had not yet seen a way to fight so huge and so evil a force. Now he is one of us. You all know of his exploits on the recent raid at Hadar. He has distinguished himself with skill and bravery..." She paused, glancing over at Keyan then. "...and, I think, a little luck." Keyan grinned back at her.

"And luck is something we'll need a good supply of, along with our dedication and sacrifice. The Empire is vast, and we will need all the help we can get. Therefore, we welcome Keyan 'Lucky' Farlander to the Rebel Alliance, and promote him to Lieutenant."

Then General Dodonna came up to Keyan and pinned a new insignia of rank onto his uniform.

As the audience began to applaud, he heard the general say, "Now don't get cocky. You still have much to learn. You'll be back on the simulators tomorrow." But Keyan only saluted and basked in the approval of his new friends. There would be time enough for training. Time enough to face the Empire. They were out there, he knew. For today, however....Today was his lucky day.

After the ceremony, Mon Mothma motioned for Keyan to follow her, leading him back to the office where he had first met the Rebel leader. "I called you lucky today, Lieutenant, and perhaps that was true. But you should know that the Force is strong in you."

"The Force?" asked Keyan.

Mon Mothma was a woman of great intensity. Keyan had seen this already. But when she spoke next, her focus was as tight as a laser, her voice resonant with power. "The Force is the energy field created by all living beings that binds the galaxy together. It is the greatest power we know of, and I believe it is the Force that is working through you. It is a rare gift, to be strong in the Force. Once there were many who could teach you about the Force. Now, sadly, few remain. Seek out one who can teach you. It is your destiny."

Later that night, Keyan lay awake. It had been a lucky day. Right up until Mon Mothma had mentioned the Force. Now, Keyan could not shut off visions of an uncertain future and the role he would play. Destiny. It had an ominous sound. He decided he liked lucky better. Finally he fell into a deep sleep, and in his dreams he heard a voice-a voice at once alien and yet strangely familiar . . .

"Life creates it. Makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter. You must feel the Force around you. But beware the Dark Side. If once you start down the Dark Path, forever will it dominate your destiny. Consume you, it will. A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense; never for attack. There is no why. There is no try. There is do. Or do not."

Of course, I didn't know the importance of the holos I had recovered. And I think that Mon Mothma and the other commanders made too much of my exploits. But who could complain? I got a promotion to lieutenant and made many new friends. And I guess that any group of loyalists, outnumbered and outgunned, would try to boost morale by creating heroes. I just didn't really see myself as one.

It was what Mon Mothma told me privately about my having something to do with destiny and the Force that bothered me most. That and the dreams I was starting to have. But that's another story.

I had just completed the last of the A-wing historical training missions, and was climbing out of the cockpit of the simulator when Commander Dafid called me on the comm.

"Farlander. Report to my office. Dafid out."

Jan-lo was nearby. She had been going through the training with me, although I had the idea that she would be going into intelligence training before long. She gave me one of those looks. You know, like, "Uh-oh. What did you do now!" I just shrugged. I had no idea what "TIE-Die" wanted. Jan-lo offered me an encouraging thumbs-up as she entered the simulator.

I walked along the row of simulator pods and turned left. Dafid's office was just down the hall from the simulator room; as I approached, I noticed someone standing in his doorway and facing into the office. I could see only the back of the man, but his bearing was very military, and from his shoulder insignia I could see that he was a lieutenant commander. I slowed my pace to see whether I could overhear what they were saying. Best to go in as prepared as possible.

"... he seems to know his way around a blockade runner, commander," the man in the door was saying.

I couldn't hear the reply.

"I know he's green. But you said yourself that his simulator scores were nearly perfect. And General Dodonna himself..."

The man's voice trailed off as a slightly louder, but still incomprehensible, reply emerged from within the room.

"With all due respect," continued the first man, "we could use his help. There are so many operations in planning stages at this time. Well... We can't wait for every..."

The man was interrupted as a voice bellowed from inside the room.
"Farlander! Where are you? Get in here. Now!"

By now only a few meters away, I spoke up. "I'm here, sir." As I walked up to the door, the man standing there turned. I didn't recognize him, but that was nothing to be surprised at - thousands of people were aboard the Independence.

"You're Keyan Farlander!" asked the man, sounding a little dubious.

"Sir!" I saluted crisply and stood at attention. Rebel officers were pretty lax about such things, generally, but I thought that this officer would appreciate the gesture.

"At ease. lieutenant. Relax." The man smiled, seemingly at some private joke. He didn't look like a man who smiled often. "Commander Dafid tells me that you aren't ready for active duty yet. What do you think, lieutenant!"

He was asking my opinion? "I think that whatever the commander says is probably true, sir."

"Listen, Farlander..." The man hesitated a moment and then turned back to Dafid. "I'm just the envoy, anyway, Dafid," he said. "General Dodonna seems to want this pilot in service as soon as possible. Don't ask me why." Turning back to me and giving me a sort of skeptical look, he added, "Have you completed the historical simulator training!"

"Yes, sir. But..."

The man held up his hand to stop me. "No huts, lieutenant. If the general wants you, he gets you. You're to report to the duty officer for Red Squadron tomorrow at 0600 hours." He saluted to me and sort of tipped his head to

commander Dafid, and then he spun around and left before I could answer. I stood there, stunned, watching him disappear down the hallway.

"Farlander..."

I faced Dafid, not really sure what to say. "Sir!" was all I managed.

The commander stood up from his desk and put his hand on my shoulder. It dug in a little too hard. He sometimes had trouble gauging the strength of his mechanical hand. "Farlander, that was one of the general's staff officers. They want you. You're to be the sacrificial lamb. Just remember everything you've learned here, and don't take this hero business too seriously. Heroes who fly starfighters most often meet with a quick end."

"Yes, sir," I said. I couldn't have agreed more. "But, sir!"

"What is it, Keyan!"

This was the first time - ever - that he had called me by my first name. It made me nervous.

"I was just going to ask... Am I really not ready yet!"

Dafid laughed so abruptly I almost jumped.

"Ready? Who's ever ready? You'll be all right. Keep asking yourself whether or not you're ready yet, and when the answer is yes, that's when you might consider a nice desk job. The end is near." He was still chuckling, the scar on his face stretched white, but then his smile faded and he spoke more seriously. I had never seen the commander in such a mood before. "In answer to your question, lieutenant, you're a damn good fighter pilot. If you can stay alive through your first few missions, you've got a chance. Just watch your back... and don't try to take on a Star Destroyer in an X-wing." I smiled then, but later I was to remember the commander's caution, and it would not seem humorous at all.

Reporting for Duty

I reported for duty early the next morning, and was sent to Briefing Room 7, a small room dominated by a large 3-D holo projection map. I recognized a few of the pilots who had arrived before me, and some nodded in my direction, but there was little conversation. I looked for a spot as far in the back as possible, and settled nervously into the auto-contour scat.

When Hamo arrived, he grinned and said, "Here we go," and then went off to talk to some other pilots I didn't know. Shortly thereafter, the briefing began.

"We've had some success lately against the Empire forces, but that only means that we have to be more careful. Our hit-and-fade tactics are working well enough to provoke a response from the Emperor."

Commander S'man began the briefing. I had seen him a few times before: He was hard to miss at nearly seven feet tall and close to 300 pounds. People said that he was a frustrated fighter pilot - too big to fly one - and that he had become a tactical genius and a mission planner just so that he could stay near the action. Whatever his story, people also said that he was tight with General Dodonna and Admiral Ackbar, and that S'man had planned many of the most successful Alliance missions.

For a moment he stood before the large holo sphere, with nothing displayed.

"A response from the Empire isn't exactly what we want, but our informants tell us that a response is what we're going to get. So, our first priority is to find out what what we can expect, and where it will take place. All we can know for sure is that the Empire will respond with a warhead to scratch an itch."

"Fortunately, we have several advantages. First, we have good intelligence about the Empire's movements through our network of informants. It's hard for the Empire to keep secrets when everything they do is on such a large scale. Second, we are few and hard to find. Third, our starfighters can hyperspace into combat and back out again while theirs are not hyperspace-capable. Fourth, we have a dangerous new starfighter which all of you have trained on - the A-wing."

Some shouts of agreement came from the assembled pilots and staff - the A-wing was popular with most pilots - but S'man put one of his great hands up and order was instantly restored.

"Don't get too confident, men. This is a life-or-death struggle, and the Empire still has the upper hand. Now, the general and his staff have worked hard to set forth the following goals, and you men will be risking your lives to accomplish these goals, so we want you to hear them.

"First, our informants are working hard to gain more information about the Imperial counterstrike, but we are also looking for ways to help ourselves. We hope to intercept some Imperial convoys, or perhaps capture some Imperial officers and find out what they know.

"Second, we have decided to evacuate our current base at Briggia. Our security is very tight, but nothing will remain a secret forever. We will have to mount a rear-guard action to protect the evacuation in case the Empire discovers the operation.

"Third, we must mount effective counterstrikes to delay the start of the Empire's response. In other words, we'll muck up the works."

There was general laughter at this uncharacteristic comment. but it faded quickly, and the commander went on as though he hadn't said anything out of the ordinary.

"Fourth, we expect to have several opportunities to capture military supplies as the Imperial operation begins to build up its ordnance.

"Fifth, we must seek new allies in our fight against the Empire. Several worlds are learning, through first-hand experience, that the Empire brings oppression when it promises peace, and we must work to prove ourselves a worthy alternative. One such world is Sullust, and, like the Calamarians, the Sullustan are a strong spacefaring race. Their superior navigation skills would be a great help to us.

"Sixth, well, sixth is to seize any target of opportunity. The High Command is studying several plans designed to hurt the Empire, and help our cause throughout the galaxy. We'll need your help to get it done.

"All that said, let's get to your first mission...."

OP 1: Destroy Imperial Convoy

I flew an X-wing in a hit-and-fade strike against an Imperial convoy. I was the wingman, and Hamo was my flight leader. During the mission, a corvette assigned to escort the convoy decided to defect to the Alliance, and a pair of Y-wings was ordered to disable the Imperial corvette so that one of our transports could capture it.

I used my normal mission-start sequence with the following exception: After hyperspacing into the engagement area, I transferred all laser power to my shields. (In retrospect, since no one shot at me, I could have redirected all shield power to the engines and just worried about maintaining full lasers.)

Anyway, I redirected all cannon power to the engines and got my speed up to 125. My map readout showed five enemy freighters in the area. The nearest two already had their shields down, and Hamo went after them. The next three formed a line stretching away toward their hyperspace jump point, and my job was to prevent the first two of them from escaping. I cycled through the targets until I located the third freighter. It was approximately eight clicks away. I headed toward it while Hamo began his run on the first two freighters. As soon as he destroyed them, he headed home.

Now, although I needed to get only the next two, I figured that if I moved quickly enough I could get all three, so I switched to torpedoes and selected dual-fire mode. As soon as I got a red lock, I fired two salvos of two torpedoes and then switched to cannons. When I was two clicks from the target, I reset the cannon and shield recharge rates to maximum and transferred shield power to the lasers until they were fully supercharged. I began firing as soon as the target box turned green (1.50 km).

I like to aim for a side of the freighter; it's bigger than the middle and easier to hit. This way, I took out freighter Arreis on the first pass. To prevent closing on the target too rapidly, I reduced throttle to one-third. As soon as the Arreis was finished, I transferred cannon power to my shields. Then redirected cannon power to the engines and reset the shield recharge rate to normal.

I cycled forward to target the next freighter (the Nigiro) in the CMD at approximately four clicks away. As soon as I had a lock, A fired my remaining pair of torpedoes and then switched back to lasers, repeating the tactics I used on the Arreis. With my mission objectives completed, I headed back toward the corvette Bixby, which was being captured, and waited for my Mission Complete orders.

Transcript of Interview with Captain Nogdra of the Imperial corvette Bixby

Interrogator: So, captain, why have you decided to come over to us?

Nogdra: It's... you don't know what I've seen. I can't... (pause)

Interrogator: Go on.

Nogdra: I can't condone their actions. Before I became captain of the Bixby, I was stationed on a Star Destroyer. I watched them destroy entire cities just to make a point. I watched them load intelligent beings into freighters with almost no life support and ship them off to who knows where... I held my tongue, but I'm not like that.

Interrogator: Like what?

Nogdra: I grew up on a Hub planet. I grew up with all kinds of beings. I can't accept the policies of hate and repression I've been ordered to uphold. I'm here to help you, if you'll have me.

Interrogator: How can you help us?

Nogdra: I'm a good captain. And I have some information. Not much, I'm afraid, but a little.

Interrogator: Tell me what you can.

Nogdra: Well, we were recently near Dellalt. The Imperials are using it as a staging point for supplies and equipment. I'd expect them to start operations in that sector. I'll give you the coordinates of the staging point....

"Farlander!" It was Commander S'man himself.

"Yessir!" I answered. I had been walking down the hallway toward Ops when he caught up with me.

"Come with me," he said. walking alongside me.

"Where are we going!" I ventured. It was like talking to a giant; your neck bent at a strange angle when you tried to look him in the eye. It made me feel small.

"I've got an assignment for you," he said.

OP 2: Reconnaissance Mission

I was in a lone A-wing with no missiles. As fast as the A-wing is, I felt pretty exposed; it was my first completely solo mission. I reminded myself that my job was to ID the enemy ships and that, to do so, I had to have each one targeted in the CMD as I approached it.

I began my normal mission checkout and start sequence. There was a Frigate about 4.5 clicks away when I hypered in, and I noticed two TIE fighters on patrol. With laser and shield recharge rates at maximum, I turned my A-wing toward the Frigate, but I targeted the nearest TIE fighter - it was just to the right of the Frigate and a little high. I shot both TIEs on the first pass and noticed that two more were launched immediately, but I kept heading toward the Frigate. A put it in the target box and executed a close (0.7 click) fly-by to identify it as the Warspite.

By this time, a pair of corvettes had jumped in. As I headed toward them, I checked to see that my shields and lasers were fully charged, and then reset recharge rates to normal. The TIE fighters flew in pursuit, and I let them come on. The farther they got from their mother ship, the better. I knew that destroying them at a greater distance would buy me time before the next wave could reach me.

As I closed on the two corvettes, a freighter appeared. It was closer than the corvettes, so I targeted it and flew close to identify it. I discovered that I had to

get very close, within 0.30 click, to identify freighters and corvettes. After identifying the FRT Ruggert, I continued toward the corvettes. With the TIE fighters still in pursuit, I used the weave pattern we were taught to avoid their fire.

While I was identifying CRV group 327, three more corvettes appeared on my screen. I identified them as group 758, and with all five corvettes accounted for, A kept flying past them until I was out of their laser range.

Finally, I decided to finish off the TIE fighters, which were still following me. I noticed that TIEs with hull damage would head for their mother ship, and that the mother ship generally would not send out reinforcements as long as the wounded TIE was still operational, so I let one TIE get away, buying even more time.

Soon, three more corvettes appeared. As before, while I headed toward them, a freighter (Eichler) entered nearby space, followed by two more corvettes. A ID'd the first group as 427 and the second as group 524.

Finally, two Frigates came out of hyperspace. I checked to be sure that my shields were fully charged, and hurried toward them, aware that they were launching TIE fighters. After I identified them as Frigates Harasser 1 and Harasser 2, a Star Destroyer (the Invincible) appeared. My Mission Complete message flashed on, and I hypered home.

A few days after I got back from my solo mission, I began to suspect that something big was about to happen. We weren't told anything at first, but the senior officers seemed agitated, and I couldn't help but notice that many senior staff meetings were taking place. Nobody was talking about it, but there was a strong feeling of anticipation onboard. I asked Hamo whether he knew anything. He had made captain after his last mission, and his irrepressible confidence seemed to have gone up a notch, if that was possible.

"I figure we'll find out soon enough," he said. "After they plan what has to be done, you know who'll do it, don't ya!" He grinned. "Stop worrying, Farlander. Me, I can't wait to get back into the action."

The suspense ended the next day. We were called into Briefing Room 1 with several other squadrons. This time it was General Dodonna himself who led the meeting. He stood at the podium and watched the room as we settled into our seats. His face appeared calm, but I thought that I detected some worry in his expression. When we were all settled, the general began.

"Operation Strike Fear," he said quietly. "This is the Imperial response we have been anticipating.

"Some of you already know that we have planned to evacuate the Briggia base and move to a new location. However, recent events have forced us to take action sooner than expected: We have learned that the first target of Operation Strike Fear is Briggia itself."

The general paused again, stroking his gray beard, as a murmur went through the crowd of pilots. Finally, he consulted his personal holo-player, then activated the master holo display.

Immediately a small blue planet appeared in the center of the display, and several ships were launched from its surface. The general motioned to someone behind him, and the entire display was magnified several times until the planet filled about a quarter of the holo sphere and the ships were recognizable as various Rebel shuttles and transports.

"In a matter of hours, we will hyperspace to the Briggia area and mount a series of operations designed to protect the evacuation. Red Squadron, you'll be responsible for protecting the senior staff shuttles. Gold Squadron, I want you to lend one Y-wing in support of Red Squadron's X-wings."

As the general described the mission, more ships appeared in the display. I knew that the entire briefing was being recorded and would be handed out when we disbanded.

"Blue Squadron, you'll prepare for a separate mission to protect our base equipment transports," the general continued. "Now here is where the mission will begin."

OP 3: Fly Point During Evacuation

I took the wingman position in my X-wing, teamed up with a flight leader I had never flown with before. I began with my standard mission-start sequence, but cut throttle to two-thirds, following X-wing Red 1. I cycled through the targets until shuttle Arroyo 1 appeared in the CMD, and I assigned it and the next two shuttles to memory locations in the targeting computer. Since these were the ships I had to protect, I wanted to be able to find them quickly.

About the time we reached the shuttles, the Star Destroyer Invincible dropped out of hyperspace. I queried the CMD to target the nearest TIE fighter, Alpha 1, communicated to Red 1 that he should attack it, and then cycled forward to target T/F Alpha 2. If any of T/F Alpha or Beta were to get by me, I knew that I could use torpedoes on them, just as long as they didn't escape. After all three shuttles entered hyperspace, the mission was complete.

We were all pretty worn out after the evacuation and the Imperial attack. I know that I was ready for a long rest. and I could see in the faces of my fellow pilots that they had also tested their limits. Many of the men were unshaven, and their faces looked drawn. The women seemed to have held up a little better, but they all showed the strain. It was harder to tell about the alien races, but it was easy to assume that they, too, were tired.

Then there were the faces that were missing from our circle of comrades. The memory of them seemed to occupy a space that made everyone less comfortable. I still expected to see Karka or Dontal whenever I saw Misch'an, but I knew I would never see them again. It was the missing people that got to me, and it was as though a cold wind blew through the ship when I thought of them.

There was no rest. There was no time for a break. We had been hurt, but the Empire had also suffered losses. There was already talk about mounting another raid on Imperial supply convoys. We were called in to a briefing the day after the Korolev affair, and I was surprised to see Sunnar Jan-lo in attendance.

"Hey, Farlander. Looks like I'm going out on this mission with you." I was surprised, and I guess it showed. Her expression soured a little, and she added, "You're not the only one who can pass the training, you know."

"I didn't mean..." I began. "I mean, I thought you wanted to go into intelligence."

"Yeah. Maybe eventually, but the Alliance needs more pilots. At least that's what the brass think. You heard about Poussan, didn't you!"

"No," I answered.

"Bought it. In the evacuation," she said tersely. "He collided with a TIE fighter, and his shields were too low."

"But how did he get into the action in the first place!" I asked, astounded. "When I left training, he was behind you."

"Don't know. I think he was just in the wrong place when they needed another body in a starfighter. Bad luck, I guess."

"What about Gart!" I asked, thinking about the quiet young man who had come up with us. I had never really gotten to know him, but now I was curious.

"Washed out. Disorientation problems," answered Jan-lo. "But he told me that he's going to try again. He doesn't talk a lot, but he seems to want to make it through the training. Wants it real bad. We might see him out there eventually."

It was sobering. One of my fellow Agamarians was already a casualty. Another a washout. It brought back feelings I had suppressed. Feelings of home, and with them feelings of frustration and anger. "Just make sure you don't buy it, Sunnar," I told her seriously.

"I'll be all right. Watch your own back, hotshot."

Then the briefing began.

OP 5: Ambush Imperial Supply Convoy

I began my normal mission-start sequence, but then switched to torpedoes and selected dual-fire mode. Querying the CMD displayed a TIE fighter from group Beta. I sent my wingman to attack it and then targeted the corvette, which was directly in front of me.

As soon as I had a lock, I fired all six torpedoes as quickly as I could. After firing the last pair, I queried the CMD again for the nearest fighter and switched back to lasers. Still angry over the news about Poussan, I engaged T/F groups Alpha, Beta, and Delta.

The Y-wings came in a minute after I arrived, and I kept the TIEs busy and away from them. When all the escorts were destroyed, I went to help the Y-wings destroy the now defenseless freighters. I targeted the closest freighter and called my wingman to help me. Of course, we had no trouble with the freighters, and then we got our Mission complete message and hypered home.

"Sorry, Lieutenant Farlander, no ops today," said the hangar requisition officer.

"But I have orders to go out on recon," I said. "Check the roster on the computer."

The man shrugged. "It's not that I don't want to send you out, but I have no more ships."

"What about all those!" I asked, pointing to a row of X-wings lined up and down the hangar.

"Look, lieutenant, I can't make 'em fly without more R2 units. You get me some 'droids, and I'll give you the starfighters. Deal!"

I stared in frustration. "I'll do my best," I answered after a moment, but the man had forgotten about me already, and was arguing on the comm with somebody else.

OP 6: Raid for R2 Units

I checked out my A-wing's systems and performed normal mission-start procedures. I found the freighter ARS Opus, the one with the R2 units, and stayed close. Pirate Y-wings (showing neutral blue in the CMD) appeared about 30 seconds after I had hypered in. I queried the CMD for the nearest one, and ordered my wingmen to attack it.

Realizing that a Y-wing's cruising speed is only 80, I was careful to keep my own speed under control. Anticipating the arrival of enemy reinforcements, I conserved my missiles and used lasers against the pirate Y-wings.

I watched the computer readout with one eye, and within two minutes our shuttle, Rescue Riker, had docked with the freighter. I noticed that none of the Y-wing pirates went after it, a fact that would make my job easier. However, when four transports entered, I quickly realized the threat they presented, targeted them, and ordered my wingmen to attack.

I switched to missiles and selected dual-fire mode, figuring that the transports would try to disable the freighter as soon as the Rescue Riker captured it. I found that each transport required either three missiles or two missiles and a couple of laser blasts. After taking care of the first four transports, another wave of four appeared. My wingmen and I attacked them quickly, as well.

After the ARS Opus was captured, Blue Squadron's A-wings hypered in to form an escort. A pirate shuttle appeared, but it wasn't able to do anything with the freighter now operational and Blue Squadron's A-wings protecting it. I continued to attack enemy ships, however, until my R2 beeped and the Mission Complete message came over the computer.

For a few days things were quiet, as the technicians wiped the R2 units clean and checked all of them out. Hamo and I spent some time in the pilot's lounge talking about old times and playing Horansi, a particularly ruthless card game that was becoming popular among the Rebel pilots.

Hamo had a badly sprained wrist from the incident with the R2, but he was in good enough spirits, even if he couldn't fly for a while.

While we took our leisure, the High Command was busy, and Hamo and I were called into a private briefing with Commander S'man on our first shift, three days later.

"Several of our phase goals have been accomplished," Commander S'man was telling us. "Now we are ready to proceed with the fifth of our stated goals - namely, to help the Sullustans resist Imperial oppression. It's time we give them a reason to join the Alliance.

"We have discovered a secret operation that has been transporting important Sullustan prisoners from their home world to the Imperial capital; no doubt for interrogation, torture, and servitude. In four hours, we will launch a rescue operation as the prisoners are shuttled to a waiting Imperial Frigate. If successful, this mission should obtain widespread support for us on Sullust, and hopefully the Alliance will gain a powerful new ally in support of our cause."

The commander looked down at us then, as though assessing our worth, before continuing.

"We want to keep this mission quiet for now. There's a significant risk that, if we send in too many ships, the Imperials will kill the prisoners. We've decided that one pilot in a Y-wing should begin the rescue attempt, and we'll send in rescue transports after the shuttles carrying the prisoners have been disabled. It's a risky undertaking, and I tell you that I was opposed to it."

The commander checked a wrist display and then looked down at me.

"Failure could be disastrous. Remember that, Farlander. Be ready at 04:15," he said.

"Me!" I asked, somewhat incredulously.

S'man looked amused. "That's right: You. We've seen your ability to assess a situation, and then take the appropriate action under extreme pressure. This will be tougher than anything you've accomplished so far, but we think you're the right choice. And Blastwell!"

"Sir!" Hamo replied.

"You go over the mission plan with Farlander, and make sure that he knows everything you know. Check!"

"Check," Hamo told him. "Come on, Keyan. And don't worry. It'll be fine."

OP 8: Rescue Sullustan Tech Staff

I dropped out of hyperspace behind a large formation of a dozen transports, the nearest less than two clicks away and to my left. A pair of Nebulon-B Frigates, about 12.5 clicks away, launched two TIE fighters approximately 30 seconds after I arrived on the scene.

A performed my normal mission-start sequence, and then checked the Inflight Map to see how the transports were deployed. Most of them were on the right side of an extended vic formation. I targeted the rearmost ship on the right, which put me in a good position to move up the line quickly, identifying each transport in turn. I set my speed down to about 40 as I worked my way through the formation.

I switched to ion cannons, but held fire until I had finished my identification run. I figured that shooting at them now would just make them take evasive action, which would make my job more difficult. For now, they were just continuing on course without reacting to my presence, and I didn't want to do anything to change the situation.

A flew through the entire formation, keeping my speed under control so that I wouldn't collide with one of the slow-moving transports. I came very close to each transport so that my Y-wing's weak sensors could ID the craft. When I located a transport with prisoners, I assigned it a memory location. I proceeded until I had checked all the transports, discovering that only two of them were carrying prisoners.

When I was sure that I had found all the prisoners, I switched to torpedoes and fired one torpedo into the second prisoner transport to weaken its shields. After that, I switched to ions to disable it, which took only two supercharged dual-fire blasts.

Immediately I called up the other prisoner transport from memory and looped back to give it the same treatment. I did my best to disable them close to each other to make it easier to offer protection while the rescue operation began. I located Rescue 1 and Rescue 2 in the CMD and assigned them to my two unused memory locations. I wanted to check their status quickly in case I missed any messages about them.

Next, I called up the nearest TIE Interceptors, realizing that if they were still far enough away (at least six clicks), I could take out the Zeta group, which handled themselves like novice pilots. I kept watching the approach of T/I groups Alpha and Beta, though, knowing that TIE Interceptors were rarely flown by novices and that they represented a real threat.

I finished off the Zeta TIEs quickly, but stayed near the transports as Alpha and Beta closed in. I used torpedoes to take out the leaders from a distance, and then engaged with my cannons to finish the wingmen. This tactic was pretty much the same one I had used previously with good results.

I noticed that a new wave of T/Is was launched as I destroyed the first. After Alpha and Beta were destroyed, I waited until the rescue mission was complete and Rescue 1 and Rescue 2 made it into hyperspace. When the Mission Complete message flashed on, I hypered out as well.

I arrived at the hangar on the Independence just as the rescued Sullustan prisoners were being escorted from the shuttles. With their wide eyes blinking in the bright light, they seemed momentarily disoriented, but quickly began chattering to themselves in high-pitched voices, looking around and pointing at various ships and other features in the hangar.

Another Sullustan came up to the group. He was dressed in Rebel uniform, and I recognized him as a navigator aboard the Independence. The Rebel Sullustan greeted the newcomers in their language, and they fell silent as he gave some sort of speech. Then they all began talking at one time.

I was turning toward the exit, on my way to report for debriefing, when I heard my name called in a sibilant, high voice.

"Lieutenant Farlander? Sir!"

I turned, and saw the Independence navigator facing me, his large, coal-black eyes unblinking and his oversized ears twitching slightly. Behind him stood the entire group of Sullustan prisoners, likewise favoring me with their disconcerting gazes. Once before, I had met the navigator, a very mild, kindly being whose name I never could figure out how to pronounce. But now I would have to do my best. I saluted.

"Lieutenant Commander Chiithii'n," I answered.

"Lieutenant, my friends from Sullust wish to thank you personally for your role in securing their rescue from the Empire. They want you to know that, if you should ever happen to visit our home planet, they will feast you on the choicest drutash grubs from the deepest caverns of Sullust, and bathe you in our most caustic green mud from the hot springs at Piringiisi."

Unsure how to respond, I gave a half bow. They came up to me, touching my face with their delicate fingers and speaking very broken Basic. Finally, an officer from protocol came with a droid who spoke to them in their language. They all laughed and followed the officer after waving good-bye to me. I hurried to meet Commander Lagrane and complete my belated debriefing.

For two weeks we flew routine missions while negotiations took place between the leaders of Sullust and the Rebel High Command. Finally, a summit meeting was arranged. Hamo was at last ready for action again, and we were assigned to fly Combat Space Patrol for the event.

OP 9: Diplomatic Summit at Sullust

We dropped out of hyperspace and surveyed the meeting location. It was all clear, and a few seconds later the rest of the summit participants began to arrive: two corvettes, four transports, the Frigate Sor-SuLL II, and two shuttles. I began my normal mission-start sequence and stayed close to Hamo, my flight leader, as the shuttles and transports began their slow dance around the larger ships. We saw no sign of Imperial intervention, but kept our eyes open.

A few minutes later, the Star Destroyer Invincible appeared behind the Sor-SuLL II and launched TIE Interceptor group Alpha, followed shortly by TIE Bomber group Zeta. Each group consisted of three ships. I figured that Hamo, out of real action for some time, would happily handle the threat without much help, but I wasn't about to let him go in alone.

The first two groups were rather poor pilots, and we took care of them quickly, firing torpedoes at the Bombers and then destroying the T/Is. A second wave was launched almost immediately, but they also flew poorly, and we had no real trouble with them.

No serious threats evolved, and we kept the meeting safe until, finally, the last ship jumped. As soon as the Sor-SuLL II hypered out, we got the Mission Complete message, and left for home.

"Well, now we know why the Imperial attack on the summit was so feeble," said Hamo, bursting into my cabin unannounced.

Looking up from the holo novel I was enjoying, I asked, "What do you mean!"

"Look, kid: Didn't you wonder why the Empire would send a Star Destroyer after the meeting and then launch some bunny pilots at us? It was just a diversion!"

"Diversion? For what? Cut to the dogfight, Hamo."

"They got the Sullustan leader. While we were out there meeting with the delegation, stormtroopers kidnapped the Sullustan leader."

I was dumbfounded, and I think it showed.

"So what are you waiting for, rookie!" said Hamo. "Let's go!"

"Hey," I called as I followed him out the door. "Where are we going? And who are you calling a rookie!"

OP 10: Rescue Sullustan Leader

Well, I'm not sure why I got to fly the Y-wing while Hamo got an X-wing. Maybe it had something to do with my success when I rescued the prisoners.

Whatever the reason, I had the task of identifying and disabling the shuttle with the Sullustan leader in it.

I began my standard start sequence, but dropped throttle to two-thirds and switched to lasers. A quick survey of the CMD showed that TIE fighter group Alpha was about to turn and attack me, and I let them, taking out one in a head-on pass. Then I switched to torpedoes, as the remaining T/Fs continued past me, and fired one torpedo at each shuttle - not to destroy them, of course, only to weaken their shields.

Now I noticed that some shuttles turned to fight back; clearly not the ones with the prisoner. I reselected my lasers and took them out. The one remaining shuttle was the one I had to disable, and it was still on course for the Invincible.

So that I wouldn't lose it, I targeted it in the CMD and assigned it to a memory location, using the Wotan Weave as I closed in because the remaining TIEs from group Gamma were on my tail. Some TIE Interceptors from group Beta seemed to want to join in as well, but I couldn't take time to fight them yet. I had to disable the shuttle before it got too close to the Invincible.

After switching to ion cannons and checking that they were on dual-fire, I disabled the shuttle as soon as I was in range, then switched back to lasers.

The Alliance shuttle Rescue 1 jumped in when the shuttle was disabled. Now I had to protect both shuttles until the mission was complete and the Sullustan leader had escaped into hyperspace.

I brought up Rescue 1 in the CMD and assigned it to the next memory location. At the same time, I checked the computer and noticed a new TIE Interceptor group, Delta. I targeted Delta 1 and assigned it to a memory location, and then I turned my attention to the TIEs nearest the shuttle. I concentrated on T/I Beta group as my highest priority, determined to eliminate them before T/I Delta came into range.

Next, I brought up Delta 1 in the CMD, and switched to torpedoes - I had three left - and fired as soon as I could lock on, one for each Interceptor. They avoided engaging me, going instead toward Rescue 1, so I was able to get good shots.

If I had missed with any of the torpedoes, I would have had to redirect all my shield power to the engines, and set the cannon recharge rate to one step above normal, in order to catch up with them and still be able to keep firing.

As soon as these Interceptors were destroyed, the Invincible launched more of them. I turned toward the next wave, reset the shield recharge rate to normal, and began transferring cannon power to the shields until the shields were fully charged again. This time I had to engage the new wave of T/I Delta with lasers. Again, I redirected all shield energy to my engines in order to keep up with them.

The good news was that as I eliminated this group, Rescue 1 had also gotten the job done. I received the Mission Complete message after the shuttle had jumped to hyperspace. With the shuttle gone, the Interceptors homed in on me, and I decided to stick around and shoot them up, even though the mission was over.

Lagrane was characteristically dour, even following missions that went exceptionally well. Oh, the occasional smirk would force itself onto his lips, like a brief distortion of time and space, but today his expression was especially linear, almost as though he were holding back emotions following some great tragedy. I wondered what could have gone wrong, and a hundred catastrophes burst forth, full-blown in my imagination. I sat and did not dare speak.

I think that he held the moment as long as he could, and then, finally, he broke into a great smile, a very un-Lagrane sort of thing that frightened me almost more than the tragic look, and said;

"Welcome back, Captain Farlander."

He held in his hand a set of captain's epaulets, and proffered them to me.

I took the patches from his hand and stared at them.

"Thanks," I said.

I couldn't really think of anything else. I wondered briefly what being a captain would do to me, and whether anything would change, but I was tired after the strain of the past few missions, and, making a few quick excuses, I made my way out of the debriefing room and into the corridor.

Of course, my retreat into solitude was not to be. Hamo was there with a few friends: Jan-lo, Gart, and a surprise.

"Hey, kid: Not bad," Hamo said, slapping me on the back and then standing back for a crisp salute, which prompted me to blush and pull his hand down. He pretended to struggle with me, throwing a few shadow punches that I blocked ineptly. I was amused, even touched, but my attention kept returning to the figure standing back just a little from the others. After a few more moments of joking and small talk, I excused myself and walked over to her.

"Lynia."

"Captain."

She half smiled and her eyes twinkled with azure and aquamarine. Like gemstones, her eyes seemed to change color from different angles. I was in danger of becoming lost in them. I mentally shook myself awake.

"I thought that I would never see you again."

"I promised to come visit you, didn't I!"

"But it's been..."

"I've been gone," she interrupted. "With Mon Mothma. We just got back to the Independence today. But I've been hearing about you. It seems you've achieved your dream."

"My dream!" I asked.

"To be a starfighter pilot, and destroy Imperial ships."

To be honest, the Keyan Farlander who had ridden up on the planetary shuttle from Agamar with this young woman seemed so long ago and so far away that it took me a moment to realize what she was talking about. I no longer

dreamed of doing anything other than what I was doing. When I flew in a starfighter, I was more at home than anywhere else I had ever been - certainly more at home than I was standing before Lynia and realizing how happy I was to see her again.

"I guess you're right. I..."

"Keyan!" It was Hamo. "Are you coming? We're going to have a party!"

"I - I'll be right behind you. I'm coming."

"Well, come on, then," Hamo hollered. "And bring your friend."

"Yeah," echoed Jan-lo. "Come on, Keyan. This is your party."

"You go on," said Lynia. "I've got to get back anyway." She must have seen my disappointment, because she smiled and kissed me on the cheek.

"I'll be back soon," she said.

Then she turned and walked away, and I watched her until she rounded the corner at the end of the hall. I could hold my own against five-to-one odds in a starfighter; you would think that I'd have better defenses against one female with heavenly eyes.

I saw Lynia on only two other occasions before she had to ship out with Mon Mothma again. We were rapidly becoming friends, but there was still a reserve. I knew that she liked me, kept tabs on me. But she would always make our meetings short and wouldn't let things get too personal between us. Not knowing whether I would ever see her again made the frustration even worse.

But duty called, and we went out on sorties nearly every day. Some were uneventful scout missions or escort details where no enemies showed up. Then, every once in a while, a really significant mission would drop in our laps without warning.

OP 11: Capture Staff From Cygnus

I was flight leader for this mission, and Jan-lo took the wing position.

We popped out of hyperspace practically in the middle of an uncomfortably large number of Imperial ships, but, fortunately, many of them seemed inert and posed no threat. We were looking for the transport that carried the Cygnus technical staff. Our job was to protect the strike team until they could escape.

I went through my start-of-mission check-out procedure, and, while Jan-lo attacked a few stationary craft, crippling or destroying them, I cycled through the target list until I found a transport. I headed toward it, and passed close by to ID it. I continued to ID transports until I found the one carrying the Cygnus staff. This one, Kappa, I assigned to a memory location.

When the Rebel transport Lightning arrived with the strike team, I brought it up in the CMD and assigned it to another memory location. As soon as I had identified TRN Kappa, TIE fighter group Zeta appeared in the target computer. Time to take on some enemy starfighters!

T/F Zeta attempted to destroy the Lightning, but I saw to it that their plans went horribly awry. Two more waves followed the first from group Zeta. When I attacked Dock 2 (the second freighter in the target list), two waves of TIE Interceptors were launched from Dock 1. I fought them and then, after the technical staff was captured, I destroyed TRN Kappa. This seemed to trigger the launch of two more waves of TIE fighters from Dock 1. I proceeded to destroy everything, even after the Lightning was safely away, and then I got the Mission Complete message.

My promotion to captain had changed my life very little. Maybe I noticed a bit more deference on the part of junior officers, and perhaps a look of jealousy from some of the pilots, but all in all, I was just the same Keyan Farlander I had been before. The one big exception was the meetings.

Now, I'm not fond of meetings, preferring to spend my time resting, socializing with the other pilots, or practicing in the simulators. But now I was required to

attend more planning meetings. That's how I learned of the plan to blow up the Invincible, one of the Emperor's premier Star Destroyers.

"We've discovered a massive explosive device the Empire has created. We don't know what they want to do with it, but we think that it would be effective against a Star Destroyer."

We stood around a large war map in one of the planning rooms. Commanders S'man and Lagrane were there, in addition to a few other commanders and captains. Hamo was there as well. I even spotted old Halley Kadorto, sitting in a corner of the room. He waved cheerily, and I waved back quickly.

"How do you think we should go about securing it!" asked Lagrane.

"We've intercepted some transmissions, and decoded parts of them. The device is scheduled to be loaded onto a freighter at the Celanon space port."

"But we'd never get away with a raid there," interjected Marskan, who usually flew with Blue Squadron.

"That's correct. Celanon is too busy and too well defended," agreed S'man. "However, the freighter appears to be bound for one of the deep-space transfer zones the Empire has been using for the past couple of weeks. The zone is heavily mined, but otherwise lightly defended most of the time. We think that we can get in and capture the freighter before the Imperials can respond.

"We'll assemble a small team. The first phase is to destroy the minefield. Then we'll send in a boarding party and capture the weapon."

He turned on the field map and began entering data from the computer. Soon, a large minefield took shape.

"Let's look at how we'll approach the minefield and where the hyperspace jump points should be," he continued. It was my first taste of mission planning. I began to find it interesting, after all.

OP 12: Recover Explosive Warhead

During my start-of-mission systems check, I turned away from the minefield and charged the secondary shields on my Y-wing to maximum. Then I headed for the mines, my throttle at one-third and my recharge rates on full. I decided to leave my lasers on single-fire, because a mine would explode with one hit, and I could shoot faster in single-fire mode.

I came in carefully, bringing up a mine and shooting almost in one quick series of motions. I watched my shield levels carefully, transferring energy from lasers to shields to keep them charged, and redirecting the shield power to keep the coverage even, fore and aft. I had to break off the attack once to reset and recharge.

As soon as I had cleared all the mines, I switched to ion cannons in dual-fire mode, and proceeded to disable the freighter Gafra. I throttled up to full power, and began to patrol the area while the Herald came in for the capture. We figured that it would take about one minute to complete the capture after docking had been accomplished.

As soon as the Gafra was captured, the Herald hypered out. At the same time, Imperial reinforcements arrived - two shuttles and two transports. Quickly I determined that the shuttles were going after me, but the transports were after the Gafra. I took evasive maneuvers to avoid fire from the shuttles, but I kept my computer locked on the transports. I switched to torpedoes and set them up in dual-fire mode.

The transports weren't going to make it easy, and I had to fire my torpedoes at practically point-blank range, keeping one eye on my shields because the shuttles were still after me. I knew that I could not afford to miss, but it was hard to get a solid lock. I concentrated on getting rid of the transports as quickly as possible, and then went after the shuttles. While I was hunting them down, the freighter escaped into hyperspace.

When I finished debriefing, I headed back to my cabin, and found a message flashing on the comm. I accessed the message idly, one hand unbuttoning my

shirt, when I stopped dead still. The message was from my aunt and uncle on Oorn Tchis!

Dear Keyan,

We hope that this message finds you well. We thought that you would want to know that your sister is being cared for around the clock. Although she is not responding yet to treatments, the doctors say that she has a strong will, and that we should not give up hope.

Rest assured, Keyan, that everything is being done for her. We are truly sorry for all that has happened.

May the Force be with you,

The message was signed "Aunt Mimya and Uncle Trinn." It was dated almost a month earlier.

It took me only an hour to discover just how difficult it was to send a message to anyone outside. It took me days to go from Communications to Logistics to Sector Command, back to Communications (to someone completely uncommunicative) to Intelligence and finally to Logistics again. In the end, I was assured that my message to Oorn Tchis might arrive in a few weeks. Or it might not. Generally, I was discouraged from trying to send any more messages.

When I wasn't trying to get by the numerous clerks and petty officers controlling outside communications, I kept to myself. Hamo was gone on some assignment off-ship, and Jan-lo had begun some additional duties as a junior trainee with Intelligence. And only the Force knew where Lynia was.

So I guess I missed some of the elation that had affected the other pilots and ops crew. We had beaten Operation Strike Fear, people were saying. We had blown up the Invincible. We could defeat the Empire. There was a sense of

hope and anticipation among the crew on the Independence, a sense of growing confidence. It lasted right up until Admiral Ackbar gave his speech.

It started out all right.

"Beings of the Alliance, I have come to congratulate you," he told us, standing on the stage at the back of the large assembly hall.

"And to warn you," he added.

My mind was ahead of him, or so I thought. He would deliver the standard speech about overconfidence so that we would realize that the Empire was still a tremendous power and a genuine danger, that the Invincible was only one Star Destroyer and the Emperor had many more. That's what I expected him to say. I whispered something to that effect to Jan-lo, who sat next to me, but she gave me one of those looks that says, "Behave yourself," and returned her attention to the Calamarian admiral.

"We have beaten Operation Strike Fear," he began simply, his huge, dark eyes blinking slowly in the brightness directed at the podium. He turned his domed head back and forth, deliberately including everyone in the room.

"You have beaten Operation Strike Fear," he said.

We all cheered. Even me. We had done it. Hadn't we?

While the admiral waited, the uproar died down, and soon just a small undercurrent of whispering and murmuring remained as background noise. Ackbar continued.

"Now you must prepare for something far worse," Ackbar said, and paused. "Far worse."

It was as if someone just dropped a muffle on us. Or sucked all the air from the room.

"We have reliable information that the Empire is developing a terrible secret weapon," the admiral went on, without seeming to notice the deflated mood of the crowd.

"We don't yet know what it is, or where it is, but we must find out. If our information is correct, it is a weapon so powerful that it could destroy entire planets, obliterate civilizations, wipe out species, and give total dominance to the Empire. The fate of the Alliance, and of all free beings, rests with you, my friends. I ask you only to do your best."

Ackbar continued somewhat longer, but I hardly heard what he said. I was too busy trying to imagine what this super weapon could be, and in my mind I conceived endless horrifying variations on its power, and of its effects on the human body. I'd guess others in the room were thinking the same way.

General Dodonna took the stage when the admiral had concluded. He outlined the objectives worked out by the High Command.

"First, we must discover everything we can about this new secret weapon.

"Second, we will try to obtain its technology or the technical specifications for the device itself.

"Third, we are developing a plan to destroy another of the Emperor's Star Destroyers.

"Finally, as always, we will respond to opportunities as they present themselves.

"Any questions!"

I met Lieutenant Cardacs just after he was assigned to the wingman position in my flight group. We had been briefed on an emergency rescue mission, and were on our way to the hangar.

"It's good to meet you, Captain Farlander; Cardacs here." We shook hands without breaking stride. Cardacs was a young man with sandy hair and pale, green eyes. He wasn't what you'd call handsome, I guess, but he didn't seem the type to notice. His face was darkened by exposure to some kind of radiation, and there were white circles around his eyes, where he must have worn protective goggles.

"Just transferred in!" I asked.

"Right. Been knocking about with some rogue squadrons in the Outer Rim. Sector Command, a little planet duty. You know."

"These protection missions are tough," I told him, looking for something to say.

"Yeah. I know. I'll stick close to you, captain. You know, I have a special interest in this mission."

"Oh!"

"Yeah. I had a friend we think was captured and sent to Mytus VII. I'm hoping he's one of the ones we're going after. Good pilot. Good friend."

"Let's make sure we get him," I answered as the hangar door irised open in front of us. "Time to go."

First Impression

Travos, D. L.

Personal Diary. Entry: GH556^8]3E

Finally, my years of hard work are rewarded. It was not an easy task, working my way up through the ranks of common soldiers. But, my ambition, my motivation was clear to all who looked at me, and my reward has been great: I have been assigned aboard the greatest weapon ever built. I am a proud soldier aboard the Death Star, hand-picked by Grand Moff Tarkin, serving for the glory of the Emperor.

Upon reaching this great station, my senses were overwhelmed. Weeks of preparation had not prepared me for the sights or sounds. As I stepped onto the flight deck and drank in the first breath of air, I knew I belonged here. Even now, as I write this, I can feel the mechanical thrum of the massive engines. It pulses with a steady rhythm, a heartbeat that pulls every soul along to its pulse. Everyone aboard realizes

the sheer power beneath our feet and all around us.

The orientation was brief and adequately prepared me for my duties. It was difficult to pay attention to the droning lecture — I know my mission, I know my part in this machine. I was enraptured by the constant clang of boots upon the decks, the hum of the air systems, the constant activity as troops, officers and Droids carried out their tasks, and I realized that I was a part of this great organism of steel that dominates the galaxy.

The feeling of power is enormous. To know that every system in the galaxy will respect and fear the Death Star. To know that I will be feared and respected just for mentioning my base. For the glory of the Empire.

35:2:13/IHV/G52E/GER.1.HMD/MIL

Imperial Forces Restore Peace to Gerrard V

Harazod, Gerrard V

After a brief but bloody battle, the Rebel uprising that has held Harazod in a grip of terror for the past week has been put down. The Imperial Star Destroyers *Adjudicator* and *Relentless*, under the command of Admiral Jion Trynn, arrived in the system two days ago, and moved quickly to neutralize the small Rebel navy that had circled the planet. The planetary shield was disabled soon after by an Imperial strike team, and Imperial forces moved into the city early yesterday.

The Rebels fell back to the capitol building, and their leader, General Camon Udeon, read from a manifesto as his small band of terrorists prepared a last-ditch defense. Trynn offered Udeon generous surrender terms, but the latter refused them by shooting the courier. Trynn withdrew his forces last night, and sadly ordered the orbital bombing of the central urban area of Harazod.

Troopers have been moving through the ruins for the past several hours, rounding up surviving Rebels. Trynn suspects that the Rebels here have ties with Mon Mothma's terrorist organization, but until Udeon and the local leadership are rounded up and questioned, this remains a speculation.

Anti-Empire sentiments have long been evident on Gerrard V, but the sudden armed insurrection of last week by segments of the Gerrard military caught Imperial observers by surprise. Governor Dannaal and Senator Chelo have been ordered to report to the Emperor on Coruscant to explain their failure to eradicate the disease of rebellion while it was yet in its embryonic stage.

Imperial HoloVision

Kyle Katarn's Tale: Assault On AX-456

With the fires of rebellion licking across the galaxy, not every Imperial operation was led by grizzled stormtrooper officers -- and not every stormtrooper was a clone. In a bid to win his commission from the Imperial Military Academy on Carida, the young cadet Kyle Katarn found himself leading three squads of stormtroopers during a lightning raid on the asteroid AX-456, a Rebel comm center established to blast psyprop at the other citizens of the Colonies' Barma sector and link up with similar comm centers in the adjacent Haldeen and Kliap sectors.

In a galaxy with more than 100 billion stars, countless planetary systems possess no wealth and so little of interest that they don't even merit a name. So it is with the system known to Barma sector's freighter jockeys only as AX -- a shortened version of its catalog designation. Scouts surveyed the system millennia ago, finding three barren planetoids and an asteroid belt circling a forlorn dwarf star. Disappointed, the scouts left the cataloging of major objects in the system to survey droids. Once the droids' work was done, the survey results were filed away on the sector capital of Dakshee, and centuries passed between ships entering the little system.

However, the AX system did have one thing going for it: location. It was near Dakshee, but also near Barma sector's borders with the Haldeen and Kliap sectors. This made it an ideal secret base for transmitting propaganda to the restless populace of Dakshee and coordinating such "psyprop" activities with stations in the other two sectors.

Rebel operatives from Dakshee eventually built a permanent relay station on AX-456, an asteroid with a particularly stable orbit. Unfortunately, Imperial slicers had already traced transmissions back to the system. The relay station was barely operational when the Star Destroyer Imperator dispatched an assault boat with three stormtrooper squads, led by a cadet from the nearby Imperial Military Academy on Carida. A strike team scrambled from Kliap sector's Vasuuli relay station managed to rescue a handful of Rebels from the pitched battle, but AX-456's station was silenced.

Wish You Were Here

The following data transmission from Biggs Darklighter to Luke Skywalker is dated a few weeks before the deaths of Luke's guardians and young Skywalker's subsequent flight from Tatooine. It was graciously given to Voren Na'al for inclusion in his report by Luke himself. He feels it is a fitting tribute to his late friend, who heroically lost his life during the Battle of Yavin.

Dear Luke,

How're things on Tatooine? Hot as ever, I'll bet. Things are getting pretty hot for me these days, too. I'm sure you're still doing boring stuff on your uncle's farm, so I'll tell you about my exciting stuff instead.

Since I graduated from the Academy, I've been assigned to a merchant ship as first mate. They won't give me many responsibilities yet, as for some reason they don't trust me all that much. I don't think we're running anything illegal, but they're nervous a lot anyway. Remember how your uncle got whenever we asked about your dad? They're sort of like that. Actually, they're a lot like that.

Hey! How is Old Uncle Whiner doing these days? When's he gonna let you come to the Academy? You were the best pilot of all of us and you're gonna be the last to go through. By the by, this Rebellion thing is getting hairy. The Empire will promise you a moon full of credits to transfer into the military, but do what I did instead — get them to commission you to a non-combat post. It's safer and you don't have to worry about their political garbage.

Seriously, if you don't get off that dust bowl soon you'll be tending vaporators for the rest of your life. Mark my words, kid.

Sometimes I miss tagging womp rats in Beggar's Canyon. You were the better shot, but I was the better flyer. Well, just as good as you at least. If you think you're any better, you'll have to come out here and prove it.

Good luck with one more season of dust and droids.

Your best friend,
Biggs

P.S. Don't show this data transmission to anyone and don't let anyone know you've heard from me. I can't tell you why now, but I will next time I'm near Tatooine. If you don't hear from me in a little while, don't worry. I've just been given some real responsibility for once in my life and it feels great.

Mutiny on the *Rand Ecliptic*

Alliance researcher Voren Na'al overheard the following story in the crew lounge of the Rebel [medical frigate](#). It was being told by [Hobbie](#) to a highly curious and nostalgic [Luke Skywalker](#), during an exchange of stories concerning their late mutual friend, [Biggs Darklighter](#). The story is used here by permission of both parties involved and in the honored memory of Biggs Darklighter.

Officially, our mission to the Bestine system was to deliver a consignment of rubindum ore -- a substance integral in the construction of [hyperdrive](#) engines -- to the newly established Imperial Navy Yard in that system. Unofficially, Biggs and I had a mission of our own. My old friend Lindy was stationed on Bestine, and in his last holotrans he had told me of his new friends -- members of the [Rebel Alliance](#). We were both anxious about what we thought we should do. When we got to Bestine, we were going to jump ship, find Lindy, and join the Rebellion. At least, that was the plan.

Everything seemed to go well, at first. Almost too well. The captain, in a stroke of sheer luck for us, ordered Biggs and I to leave the *Rand Ecliptic* and make contact with the shipyard personnel who were to take possession of the ore consignment. Captain Heliesk was an extremely efficient officer who usually went strictly by the book. It worried us that he would send both the ship's first mate and its executive officer on a mission like this. It was contrary to his usual policy of at least one of us always staying on board at all times, and we wondered if he suspected anything.

Although we were nervous, we tried to look at the bright side of the situation. We wouldn't need to jump ship after all, and since our orders were to seek out and find someone, we could "officially" spend our time looking for Lindy. Our uncanny luck continued, and Lindy found us almost immediately. He ushered us into an empty hangar where he introduced us to several of his friends. They were all secretly working with the Rebellion, smuggling starship parts and raw materials out of the system for use by Alliance shipbuilders. He was awaiting the arrival of a new Rebel contact, known to him only as "Starfire."

This contact, according to Lindy, would help us jump ship and join the Rebel Alliance. The situation was not promising, but Biggs's eternal optimism man-aged to keep me from calling the whole thing off. But when the main hangar door opened and a squad of Imperial [stormtroopers](#) flooded into the domed shell, I wished to the Force I had.

The stormtroopers quickly surrounded us and, as we feared, they were led by Captain Heliesk. He smirked confidently as he approached us. There was a long, painful pause as he looked deeply into the faces of each of the captured men, finally finishing with us. The silence was abruptly broken as he addressed Biggs and myself. "Good work. Take this Rebel scum back to the ship. Hold them in the starfire suite." He winked at me then and dropped a rank cylinder into my sweating palm.

The rank cylinder served as a key to the captain's quarters, and once the trooper escort left us, we headed straight for them. Captain Heliesk wasn't far behind us. "Boys," he grinned, "you're taking the ship."

His plan was a simple one. The Alliance needed our cargo, but since he was still a valuable spy who had a good deal of authority within [the Empire](#), the captain couldn't afford to be exposed as an Alliance sympathizer. The perfect solution was a mutiny. Biggs and I would feign revolt and capture the bridge. From there, we could use the threat of setting the ship to self-destruct to force the rest of the crew to leave. But the problem was what might happen once we lifted off Bestine. This was an Imperial Navy Yard, and there were bound to be quite a few [TIE fighters](#) they could scramble to chase after us.

The first step of the plan went well, and the crew had no choice but to abandon ship. With the help of Lindy and his friends, we were able to fully man the bridge and get the Rand Ecliptic and her valuable cargo off planet.

The next step was the tough one. The Empire did have a healthy complement of TIE fighters based on Bestine, and they were after us almost immediately. There were too many of them to fend-off with the Rand Ecliptic's feeble weaponry, but we only needed to buy enough time to make the calculations for the jump to lightspeed. Biggs had that familiar gleam in his eye.

Turning the ship's starboard hold toward the incoming swarm of fighters, he dumped half of the ore consignment directly into the path of the approaching ships. This created a small-scale asteroid field. Only a few of the fighters were able to avoid the tumbling and deadly ore. Scattered explosions and ricocheting debris filled the space behind us. The few fighters that did get through were unable to stop us from entering hyperspace and a new life with the Alliance.

35:2:17/ITI/TRD

Gladiator Droid Market Booming

Unspecified Mid-Core Node

Free-traders looking to tap into a lucrative market may find that the gladiator droid craze sweeping the Fringe and Outer Rim Territories an attractive investment opportunity. The recent release of Arakyd's Mark X and Mark XI Executioner models has sparked new interest in this ancient and rather violent sport, and Imperial political officers trapped in dreary, isolated posts are desperate for the latest in expensive, high profile diversions.

Note that Arakyd distributors do not sell directly to small-time merchants, so a trader's best bet is to deal through her regional trading cooperative. Traders not in a co-op should try companies which do deal with small cargo merchants (such as zZip). Be advised that even at wholesale, gladiator droids demand a considerable investment—the Mark X unit costs 29,000 credits wholesale. The initial sale can be followed up with further sales in maintenance packages and battle arena equipment.

Transporting these legitimately requires an LQ-1010-DNG permit from Imperial Commerce (and a thorough background check). If Imperial inspectors discover a trader with a cargo hold of the things and no permit, they'll assume that she's running assassin droids and are rather likely to shoot her on the spot. Traders are *strongly* advised to carry a permit.

Independent Traders' Infonet

Empire At War

HANDLE WITH CARE

"Ackbar told us that the development research on the Mon Calamari cruisers was annexed by the Empire and is being kept in a vault on Carida. With this data, the Mon Calamari could build their massive capital ships, giving us a great advantage against Imperial Star Destroyers."

—Mon Mothma

After rescuing Mon Calamari slaves during the Raid over Corulag, alliance command was told that the plans for Mon Calamari Star Cruisers, which had been annexed by the empire, were being held at an imperial base on Carida. If the plans were recovered, the star cruisers could be used against Imperial Star Destroyers. However, a frontal attack against such a heavily guarded planet would be suicidal. Instead, the rebels opted for a smaller raid.

Mon Mothma put out a call for smugglers, saying there would be a paying mission, although not saying what the mission was. As expected, Han Solo and Chewbacca, who she had had previous experiences with, answered the call. After they demanded extra payment in return for damages to their ship during previous rebel operations, Mon Mothma said there would be no reason for the *Millennium Falcon* to leave the ground at all. Instead, the duo of smugglers were shipped on an imperial transport.

"You should be very familiar with that system because of your days in the Academy, but it is exceedingly difficult to get landing clearances for Imperial deserters there."

—Mon Mothma to Han Solo

After getting off the ship, Han Solo decided the most likely place for the designs was in a cargo area. However, it was well protected by Turbolaser towers, so they decided to take out a power generator, which was powering the towers.

After fighting through several stormtroopers and turrets, as well as destroying an imperial barracks and two imperial Edu A-34 officer academies, they arrived at several unmanned TIE Maulers. At Han's suggestion, Chewbacca commandeered one, and it was used to take out more imperial stormtroopers.

However, the way was blocked by 4 AT-STs. Han Suggested finding another vehicle to deal with the AT-STs. The answer was not far away: an unmanned AT-AT walker. Commandeering it, the AT-STs were destroyed, and the force moved on to the main street. A force of Stormtroopers and AT-STs were sent at the rebel walker, but were destroyed. The power generator, along with an uplink station, was destroyed.

Going the rest of the way on foot, the duo captured the plans, and decided to steal a transport to escape. However, enemy reinforcements arrived. Luckily, the smugglers avoided the imperials and escaped with the plans.

"You've certainly earned this. The Mon Calamari will be able to restart their production facilities now. The Alliance would be happy to discuss the possibility of a longer-term relationship if you'd like further work..."

—Mon Mothma to Han Solo^[src]

The battle was a major victory for the rebels. Apart from causing damage to the Academy of Carida with absolutely no casualties, the rebels recaptured some very important schematics. They could now build capital ships to match the Imperial Navy.

However, Han Solo and Chewbacca decided to try and distance themselves as much as possible from the rebellion. In addition, the imperials had put together a massive naval force to try to capture Mon Calamari and destroy the shipyards before any more capital ships could be produced.

DEFENSE OF MON CALIMARI

"The Empire has wasted no time in assembling a fleet to retake the planet. If they were to reach Mon Calamari, the devastation to the planet would be catastrophic."

—Mon Mothma

Using Han Solo to capture plans for Mon Calamari Star Cruisers was a success, and shipyards over Dac began production of the cruisers. However, the Alliance discovered that a major Imperial fleet was massing over Coruscant, with the intent of invading Mon Calamari. Allowing this to happen was not an option.

"We have informants in place to alert us when the fleet gets underway. We must not waste a moment in preparing for this assault."

—Mon Mothma

Sending a detachment of their own fleet to join 5 Mon Calamari Cruisers, including Admiral Ackbar's *Home One*, over Mon Calamari, Alliance Space Stations were set up along hyperspace routes to stop the enemy's advance.

The Alliance's fleet intercepted the enemy before it could get to it's destination. Brutal fighting began, with both sides taking casualties. However, the rebels had the advantage, due to the space station, and the Imperials were losing the battle.

The new rebel cruisers proved their worth, as they managed to destroy the enemy flagships. Coupled with the rebel starfighters, the ships destroyed the Imperial Star Destroyers, and with them down, the rest of the Imperial fleet fell quickly.

"Our victory over the Empire's fleet is cause for celebration, but I find it disturbing that they appear almost unconcerned with the loss of ships and personnel. Perhaps... they no longer need the ships."

—Mon Mothma

The destruction of the invading fleet meant that the rebels significantly upgraded the Alliance Fleet. Even though the *Accuser* was hastily repaired, the rebel were clearly capable of destroying Imperial Star Destroyers.

However, Mon Mothma was unnerved by how apparently unconcerned the Galactic Empire seemed about the loss of such a large fleet. She thought that the Empire must have a plan to destroy the Rebellion.

A NEW WEAPON OF WAR

A moderate skirmish occurred on the Imperial world of Carida. With the Death Star constructing on schedule, Emperor Palpatine turned his attention to other weapons, such as Colonel Veers prototype All Terrain Armored Transport. Veers was given permission to have the prototype tested on Carida.

With at least seventeen Field commanders from the Imperial Army observing, Veers moved his vehicle through an armored barrier, destroying it in a few steps. With at least two captured Rebel T2-B repulsor tanks and two captured T4-B heavy tanks blown to smithereens, in addition to three Pod walkers meeting a similar fate. Veers moved down to the river and deployed a squad of nine Stormtroopers from the AT-AT. Killing at least nine captured Black Sun soldier's, Veers then proceeded to slaughter a captive Rancor.

Suddenly, a force of Rebel troopers and T2-B repulsor tanks appeared. Anti-infantry turrets were set up by the Imperials, however, and the army quickly slaughtered the Rebels in mere minutes.

Tarkin: *"General Veers is of the opinion that the Rebel base that launched the attack could not be far away based on the size of their force."*

Darth Vader: *"I have used his information to pinpoint Jabiiim as the likely origin point. Allow me to take a force there and crush them once and for all!"*

Palpatine: *"More important than destroying their worthless base of operations is finding the identity of the one who revealed the location of this demonstration, my apprentice."*

Palpatine congratulated Veers on the AT-AT's success. Darth Vader along with Veers calculated that the planet Jabiiim provided the staging point for the attack. Although Tarkin stated that the AT-AT would see little use other than garrison duty when the Death Star was operational, Palpatine had a possible vision of the Battle of Hoth, and counter-stated that the AT-AT would be a useful tool of the army.

THE REBEL FORTRESS

A battle at Jabiiim during the Galactic Civil War was one of the last battles of the hunt for Moff Kalast, the Imperial traitor that supplied the Rebel Alliance with datacodes for the Galactic Empire's superweapon, the Death Star.

The Rebels were well prepared for an attack; they had an Alliance Space Station and a defense fleet in orbit around Jabiiim.

The two fleets exchanged fire. Eventually, the Alliance Space Station fell to Imperial fire from Star Destroyers. The remaining forces tagged up and attempted at one last strike against the Imperial Navy, but failed. The orbital defenses were down, and the strike team landed on the planet.

The Imperials quickly found out that the local Jabiimi were supporting the Rebel Alliance, and were fired on when they landed in a small clearing in the local village. Artillery destroyed the homesteads, and the army moved on. Due to the fact that the rebels airspeeders were incapable of flying very well on the

planet, this led to the Imperials enjoying the advantage their AT-ATs would not go down as easy, although their 2-M Saber-class repulsor tanks and 74-Z speeder bikes were just as disadvantaged.

Stormtroopers engaged the Rebel infantry while the bigger vehicles entered the base shield. AT-ATs opened fire on the base shield generator, leaving the outpost vulnerable to aerial assault. TIE/sa bombers flew down and bombarded the base.

The Imperial force searched through the nearby surviving facilities for information on the whereabouts of Kalast. They found information on Kalast's estate over Atzerri, and that he was now stationed there. Emperor Palpatine demanded that the traitor be brought in for questioning.

THE TRAITOROUS MOFF

The Imperial fleet arrived at Azterri and requested that Kalast surrender himself. Kalast refused and used his own Imperial Star Destroyer as well as an attack force of Rebel Alliance ships and a station to hold off the Imperial fleet. While damage was done to Kalast's ship, he quickly jumped into hyperspace to avoid capture. The Rebel forces were quickly defeated by the Imperial fleet, but the traitor had escaped.

The Arrest over Atzerri began when Imperial forces under the command of Darth Vader attacked a Rebel Alliance enclave on the planet of Jabim.

The Imperial Navy engaged the Rebel Alliance Fleet in a string of battles around the galaxy, from Shola to Dantooine to Nal Hutta, destroying several Alliance Space Stations in a determined attempt to find him. They were able to pin Kalast down several times, but failed to effect his capture. After several battles, the final battle commenced which would bring the search for Kalast to an end.

Darth Vader found one of Kalast's last remaining strongholds. The Immobilizer 418 cruisers were activated, preventing his escape. As the fleet exchanged fire, combat ships ambushed Kalast's flagship, the *Avenger*, and destroyed its shields and other weak points. The vessel thus crippled, an *Imperial-I*-class Star Destroyer swooped in and caught Kalast in its tractor beam, taking the *Avenger* back intact as well.

T

he Shame of Seggor Tels

I saw my people living in the shadows, letting riches and glory go to the pompous Mon Cals. I watched as my people — we — built *their* cities and labored for *their* dreams. I said nothing as the hatred, the jealousy, festered within my soul.

I am Seggor Tels, Quarren, and I despise our planet-brothers with all my heart. Their very name turns my tentacles crimson with anger — the dreamers, the starseekers, the Mon Cals.

Why are they so concerned with stars, anyway? The sea is our lifegiver, our lord. That is what they should dream about, not shiny lights beyond our reach. We followed them out of the sea, compelled by their grand ideas and fancy words, onto our world's swampy shores. We surrendered the metal we mined from the ocean floor, freely and in ignorance. Then we helped them build their cathedrals of hope and imaginings — *theirs*, not *ours*.

They never saw what life was like for us in the bowels of their floating cities, couldn't understand why we had no desire to reach for the impossible. Was it so hard to ask our opinion? Would it have even mattered in the end? Whether it was their dreams or their longings or something else, the Mon Cals finally got their wish. May the Sea reclaim them! It was their own fault that I did what I did! Can't you see that?

Ackbar and his Calamarian Council were so excited when the first contact was made with the Empire. They were going to have their dream realized. They were going to meet people from another star. And in their self-important smugness they never understood that there were other dreams that needed tending, other visions that were rotting in Calamari shadows which blocked the sun. When the Imperial agent approached me, an advance scout that had slipped through our unsuspecting defenses, I knew what I had to do.

Yes, it was I, Seggor Tels, who lowered our planetary shields that fateful day and allowed the Imperial fleet access to our world. But the Mon Cals forced my hand

— they needed to be taught a lesson! Do you see what the Mon Cals' intangible wishes led to? Oh how I laughed to see the mighty Mon Cals fall!

But my laughter died when the Empire forced its iron will upon us all. We were enslaved, Mon Cal and Quarren alike. Soon both races were on equal footing at long last, slaves beneath the armored boot of the Empire.

I chuckled aloud when the insignificant Mon Cals resisted the massive Imperial fleet with their ideals, resisted absolute power with only fragile dreams. But something inside me stirred when the Imperials cut down those who refused to work in the factories, and I cursed the Mon Cals as city after city was destroyed. I wept for Calamarian and Quarren alike as I watched, waiting for the barrage of destruction to end. We were slaves now, and no dream or fanciful wish could defeat so powerful a master.

But there was a dream somewhere among the stars. It was a powerful dream that talked of hope and sounded for all the world like a Mon Cal fantasy. This Rebellion was real, however, and the off-worlder who spoke to us fired the hearts of the Calamarians. They vowed to make the Empire pay for its atrocities, but I wondered who should truly be held accountable for the centuries of injustice.

No matter, something had to be done about the Empire. Again I was forced to play a part in this quagmire of Calamarian origin. I rallied my people, convinced them to stand beside our hated brethren, and together we drove the invaders from our world.

The Empire provided the Quarren with one thing, the means to find our own place in the galaxy. Many of my people left Calamari, caring little for Mon Cals or Empires or Rebellions. They seek only a new life. I have stayed, within the endless ocean, to seek something as well. I seek to understand why I still weep at night for those who died, why I still hate the dreamers who caused it all, and why I feel shame over my role in what transpired. Perhaps what I truly seek is a dream of my own.

35:2:19/CYN/NAR.4.SHD/TRD

Ithorian Shamarok Flitters Rage of Lianna

Nar Shaddaa Node

For those looking for a quick turnaround, word's out that Ithorian flitters have become very hot items on Lianna amongst the well to-do. Flitters are small flying rodents that can imitate other beings' speech, for those who aren't familiar with this particular rodent. I sure wasn't a month ago. I have no idea why anyone would want such a little horror in his or her home, but there you are.

Ithorian herd ships are selling the flitters for about 400 credits, and the going price in Lianna Metro is 1,200 credits. Obviously, this price won't last long, but the window of opportunity will likely remain open for at least another week before everyone catches wind of it. To expedite customs at Lianna, be sure to carry an IC-40X1-CRE permit from Imperial Commerce. Note that only ships with livestock transport rated main cargo holds qualify for the permit.

Cynabar's InfoNet

The Farlander Papers

OP 1: Rescue from Star's End

I led my two-ship A-wing flight group into the area, and immediately sped toward the freighter Genua. With the Imperial transport already in the process of docking, I knew that I didn't have much time, so A left all my energy settings as they were to hold my speed at 120.

I ordered my wingman, a new transfer named Cardacs, to attack the second of the two TIE Interceptors that were coming toward us. I targeted the leader myself, and switched to missiles. As soon as I had a solid lock on my target, I fired, destroying him as we passed.

Next was a pair of TIE fighters. Having ordered my wingman to attack the number-two TIE, I switched back to cannons and took out the leader in a head-on pass. I knew that there wasn't time to get caught up in a dogfight. Now I was closing on the freighter.

The transport had docked, but I knew that I should still have a minute or so. since I didn't want the Genuie to be in the line of fire, I reduced throttle to one-third and positioned my ship behind the transport, lining up a clear shot at point-blank range.

I switched to missiles again and selected dual-fire mode, dropping my speed to zero and resetting cannon and shield recharge rates to maximum. As quickly as the launcher would let me, I fired four missiles to wipe out the transport's shields and damage its hull. Then I toggled back to cannons for the coup de grace.

Returning to full throttle, and resetting the shield recharge rate to the normal 50 percent position, I went to assist my wingman with T/F Beta 2. At this point, the Intrepid launched some reinforcements - a four-ship group of TIE fighters from Delta Squadron. After destroying Beta 2, we turned to engage the newcomers. As we battled Delta, the R2 let me know that more TIE fighters had been launched. These were replacements for Beta Squadron. Shortly after that, still more Deltas joined the fray.

By now, we were within gun range of the Intrepid, but I figured that as long as we were dogfighting the constant maneuvering would make us difficult targets. I was wrong, and my miscalculation carried a heavy price. My wingman was caught by enemy fire, and destroyed.

Then a three-ship formation of TIE Bombers (Eta) was launched. Recognizing the danger the Bombers posed, I decided to ignore the fighters for now.

I switched to missiles and reset them to single-fire mode, redirecting cannon energy to the engines so that I would close the distance quickly. As soon as I was in missile range, I reset the recharge rates for lasers and shields to maximum, reducing the rate of closure so that the computer would have time to get a solid lock.

I proceeded to take out all three Bombers with one missile apiece. A replacement wave of TIE Bombers was launched, and I eliminated them just as I had the first. During the action, I noticed that the shuttle Drago had arrived with the Rescue team.

I switched back to cannons and went after the nearest TIE fighter - There always seemed to be three or four chasing me. I quickly took out a couple of them, and then noticed a group of three TIE Interceptors from Gamma Squadron: They seemed to be headed directly for the rescue shuttle.

I targeted the leader of the Interceptors and chased him down, then did the same for Gamma 2. Gamma 3 got past me, so I switched back to missiles - I had only one left - and took him out from a distance. Figuring that there would be a replacement wave for T/I Gamma, I turned back toward the Intrepid. Sure enough, one was soon launched. I still had several TIE fighters from Beta and Delta chasing me, though, so I had to weave until I was in range to engage them.

During this battle, the Rescue Team completed its capture of the Genuie. I kept after Gamma until they were eliminated, and I got the message that the Drago and Genuie were safe. I finished off the last of the TIEs near me and hyperspaced home.

C.O.'s Analysis

Lagrane wasn't in one of his better moods. But then neither was I. I hadn't known Cardacs more than a few minutes, but that didn't make me feel less guilty over his death. And the computer analysis of my mission revealed some flaws in my strategy as well. The Commander was explaining it all to me.

"There was enough time at the beginning of the mission that you could have transferred some laser power to shields, and reset the cannon recharge rate to maximum as you closed the distance. This would have brought your speed down to 90, but that would have been fast enough. Also, you could have saved your missiles and blasted the transport with cannons instead. This would have allowed you to use missiles on the TIE Bombers and Interceptors that came later. More importantly, better attention to your Inflight Map might have alerted you to your wingman's situation, and you might have been able to come to his aid."

I must have looked like a whipped musti pup, because Lagrane suddenly lightened up a little. "Look, Farlander, he was an experienced pilot. He knew the risks. You act like you never saw anyone frag before."

"Never a wingman, sir," I answered, truly aggrieved. "It happens, captain. Let it go. Learn from it and go on. Or next time, it could be you."

Lagrane was a master of pleasant thoughts.

The next day, the rescued pilots were taking a break from their extensive debriefing, and three of them were in the mess, grabbing a bite, when I entered the room. I noticed them talking with some of the other pilots, and looking my way. I paid it no mind, and proceeded to collect some porf (which I had begun to like, much to my surprise). I sat alone, still brooding a little over the last mission, and not really wanting company.

"You Farlander!"

One of the rescued pilots, a captain by his uniform, stood at the head of my table, leaning over with his hands placed flat on its surface. I looked up in surprise.

"That's me," I answered, a little defensive at the man's obvious breach of etiquette. I studied him, assessed him almost instantly. He was dark-skinned, hard-edged, and dangerous. "What do you want!"

"I'm Samuel Raider," he said, as though it should mean something to me.

"I'm afraid you've got me there," I told him. "Do I know you!"

"You knew my friend," he said. He wasn't going to make this easy on me, whatever his problem, but something in his tone clued me in.

"You're Cardacs' friend," I said with sudden insight. He said nothing. "Listen. I'm sorry about Cardacs. He was - I didn't really get to know him. He said that you were a great pilot," I added lamely.

"Just watch yourself," Raider said at last, and then turned and walked back to his friends. They all sat there then, watching me.

So much for gratitude.

I didn't see Raider again until I was called in to a squadron briefing the next day.

"This is Captain Raider," S'man was saying. "He recently escaped from Stars' End prison, and he has brought us important information. It seems that a slave ship carrying Wookiees is en route to a mysterious Imperial project. Wookiees are allies of the Alliance, and we must attempt to rescue them."

S'man nodded to Raider, who continued the briefing from that point.

"We think that some of the Wookiees may have information about their destination." The new captain was dead serious. "The rumors about a new weapon were everywhere at the prison, but we could never get close enough to anyone who had been there. Some of these Wookiees may know more. I'm going to lead a team of A-wings to get them back. I need two other pilots."

"You." He pointed at Jan-lo.

"And you," he said, pointing at me.

Why would he choose me? I quickly ruled out gratitude as a motivating factor.

Then one of the other pilots who had been rescued spoke up; "Hey, Raider. Come on. I haven't seen action in months. Let me go."

The captain turned to his friend and said, "OK, Toalagar: You're in. You and Farlander over there."

He pointed at me again, and I had a distinctly unpleasant sensation, as though his finger was a charged laser cannon, and I was its target.

OP 2: Rescue Wookiee Slaves

Went through the standard mission-start procedure. Between us and the freighter were six of the new Assault Gunboats we had been warned about. They all seemed intent on Red 1 and Red 2. My threat indicator wasn't even flashing! Maybe they thought that the number-three spot was for rookies or

something. Red 1 and 2 proceeded with a head-on attack against the nearest enemy fighter, Gunboat Mu 1, while I made a flank attack with torpedoes.

Red 2 was lost to missiles on the first pass, but I managed to get off three torpedoes before anyone began to pay attention to me. By now, I was in the thick of it, along with Red 1, and I fired one more torpedo at short range. The target evaded at just the right moment, so I decided to switch to cannons and get back to basics. At one point, we both went after the same enemy, and Raider's cannon fire raked my shields. Accident? Or not?

"Red 3," he called over the comm. "Why don't you go find another ship!"

Finally, we destroyed all six Gunboats, then proceeded toward the freighter.

The escorting TIE fighters were split into four groups of three apiece. They had the odds - six to one. It didn't look like a promising situation, but Raider was a good pilot, and we managed to hurt them pretty badly pretty quickly. After we had cut their numbers in half, I figured that it was time to confirm the identity of the freighter. Red 1 continued after the TIEs while I peeled off for an ID run, and then I rejoined him.

The Y-wings came in a few moments after I identified the Toral. We finished off the last of the escort TIEs, and then someone on the Star Destroyer woke up and began sending reinforcements.

The next three-ship group of TIE fighters was from Theta Squadron. These guys must have been ordered to stop the Y-wings, because they were pretty single-minded about it - which made it all that much easier for us to get behind them and blow them away. By now the Y-wings had disabled the Toral, and Rescue 1 had arrived.

As soon as we finished off Theta, a replacement wave was launched, followed soon afterward by another flight of three from Zeta Squadron.

We were so caught up with Theta that I almost missed noticing that Zeta had gone right by us. Apparently, they were going after Rescue 1 before it could escape into hyperspace. Worse, they were already more than two clicks away!

I quickly transferred my cannon power to the shields, and then redirected all cannon and shield energy to the engines. Switching to torpedoes - I still had

two left - I targeted Zeta 1 and launched as soon as I got a lock. I was just about to launch the last one at Zeta 2 when I realized that I was close enough for cannons.

As I reconfigured the ELS levels and transferred some power back to the lasers, I began shooting. Rescue 1 made its jump, and I finished off Zeta. Red 1 had finished off another wave of Theta, so I formed up on his wing and followed him out.

I was stripping off my flight gear when Captain Raider came up behind me. I almost ducked. I was afraid that he might blame me for Toalagar's death, too.

"Farlander..." he said quietly.

"What is it!" I was a little defensive.

"I just wanted to apologize," he said. "For the stray shots."

"Yeah!" I answered.

"Yeah. I was hot about Cardacs, but..." He hesitated, then said, "Toalagar died... and that wasn't your fault... It was mine."

"Let me ask you something, Captain Raider," I said, deciding to get things straight between us once and for all. "Did you chose me for this mission to check me out, or to shoot me in the back!"

He looked a little shocked. "To check you out. Yeah. But to shoot you? What kind of pilot do you think I am, anyway!"

"A pretty good one, from what I saw," I told him sincerely. "But you were... You seemed to blame me..."

"I was wrong. Let's leave it at that. Come on. I've got some drinking to do, and I need some company."

He offered a handshake, and I complied. His grip was firm, and his eyes were steady.

"Oh, and Farlander..." he added as we strode up the path from the hangar bay, "You're not a bad pilot yourself."

As he started toward the hangar exit, I heard him say, more to himself than to me; "Yeah. You're OK."

OP 3: Attack Weapons Convoy

We all went through the standard mission-start procedure. I fully charged my shields and cannons, and reset the recharge rates to normal.

The first two corvettes dropped out of hyperspace and flew right past us, so we all turned to make an attack from their left rear quadrant. X-W Blue got off the first torpedoes at the number-one corvette just as three Imperial transports dropped in.

I had targeted the same corvette, but I wanted to save my torpedoes. As I was closing in to cannon range, a pair of Imperial shuttles dropped in. Next was another pair of transports, and then a pair of Assault Gunboats from Tau squadron. I kept boring in on the corvette, and saw that its shields were failing, so I reduced my throttle to one-third. I got close enough to ID it as the Hyko 1 before I broke off to make another attack run. My speed was still too high to just take up position behind it and blast away.

A pair of freighters arrived as the Hyko 1 finally began to disintegrate. As I turned to attack the other corvette, Red 1 launched a pair of torpedoes at it. In a few moments, it joined its twin in oblivion.

I went back to full throttle and targeted one of the three transports. I switched to torpedoes and was just about to get a solid lock when GUN Tau 1 opened upon me from behind. I held on a moment more, until I got the lock, fired, and then pulled back hard. It was then that I realized that Gold 1 was already blasting away at the same transport. Another torpedo wasted.

I turned to go after Tau 1, and noted the unfortunate arrival of another pair of Gunboats. I switched back to cannons, and, while I was engaging my target, yet another pair of Gunboats dropped Out of hyperspace!

As soon as Tau 1 exploded in a storm of electrical flashes and incandescent gas, I queried the CMD for the next-nearest enemy. It brought up Mu 2, which was still some distance away.

I began to cycle through the target list to find the newcomers designated as flight group Rho. I decided to go after Rho 2, and, as A turned to engage it, my R2 warned that I had a missile homing on me.

I targeted the missile and tried to evade, but it caught me anyway. Y-wings weren't made for evading missiles, but, fortunately for me, they did have strong shields.

I rebalanced and recharged my shields, then queried the CMD again for the nearest fighter threat. This time it brought up Rho 1, and I turned toward him for a head-on pass. By now I had a healthy respect for the Gunboat's firepower, so I went into a weave as soon as he began firing lasers. When we were less than half a click apart, I came out of my weave and maneuvered onto his tail. A minute later, he was history.

The chase had led me near the two freighters, so I targeted one and requested assistance from my wingmen. I switched to torpedoes, and, because I was so close, I didn't bother waiting for a lock. I launched two torpedoes in single-fire mode, and both hit. I came around for another run, and, just as I launched, I heard Red 3 take a hit. Then Red 1 bought the farm. Each had turned its tails on the enemy Gunboats in their haste to help me with the freighters. This was suddenly turning into a very bad day.

I had identified one of the freighters as the Uhuru and the other as The Tone. I kept looping back and forth between them, firing cannons mostly, but adding on a few torpedoes when I could close to point-blank range. During firing runs, I reduced speed by cutting my throttle to one-third.

Finally, both freighters were destroyed, and I cycled through the target list a few times to get an idea of how things were going.

Y-W Gold was fine, as was X-W Blue. There was one Imperial shuttle left, and four Gunboats.

I headed off toward the Gunboats, having selected Tau 2 as my target. After destroying Tau 2, I went after the shuttle. When I had eliminated it, I got the Mission Complete message, but I decided to finish off the last of the Gunboats before I hyperspaced home.

All three had ganged up on X-W Blue. I destroyed Rho 2, only to have two more show up to replace it. I reconsidered the merits of staying in the area, and decided that it was time to leave after all. The other pilots concurred. As I might have guessed, more Gunboats arrived to make life difficult. Y-W Gold 1 didn't make it, but I kept the Imperials occupied while the others escaped. In the end, it was just me and one Gunboat, and then it was just me.

C.O.'s Analysis

Lagrane was really unhappy today. No, to be honest, he was furious.

"We're losing too many pilots, Farlander. It's time you learned to be more careful. To begin with, you should probably refer to your map more often, especially when requesting assistance from your wingman. If you see that your wingman is engaged and cannot safely disengage, don't order him to help you!

"Also, analysis suggests that you might have had fewer tosses if you had taken care of all the threats before bothering with the freighters. By leaving shuttles and Gunboats active, you risked the safety of your group. Moreover, you took some risk that the shuttles and transports might get away. You probably should have made them your first priority. The freighters and the corvettes weren't going anywhere soon.

"Losing two wingmen this way is unacceptable. There will have to be an official inquest regarding the incident. I'm afraid that, in the meantime, you're to be suspended from flight operations, captain. That is all. You're dismissed!"

I never got in a word.

I blamed myself for the deaths of Tan'tro and Ahsmar. Maybe I had been lucky up to this time, Maybe I wasn't a very good pilot after all, pulling such a stupid stunt. And here I was, grounded. Maybe it was for the best.

My cabin door irised open. Only Hamo ever entered like that, without announcing himself first. I looked up slowly.

"Hey, tough break," he said.

"You heard," I said miserably.

"Don't get down on yourself. We all have our moments."

"Yeah!" I asked cynically. "Did you ever..."

I stopped short. Hamo was wearing some new additions to his uniform. He had made commander! Somehow, it only accentuated my own misery.

"You're a commander," I said after a moment.

He looked a little embarrassed. "Yeah, well, it's a long story. You want to go grab some port and something to drink? Come on. You need to get out of here."

I mounted a token resistance, but I let Hamo coax me into going with him. I was happy to see him again, but I dreaded meeting anyone else. I felt like a failure. Like a murderer.

When we reached the mess, I spotted Raider and a couple of other pilots sitting around, just passing the time between missions. Raider got up and joined us after a few minutes, sliding easily into one of the seats across from me.

"Porf, eh!" He made a face that adequately expressed his opinion of our meal. I made the introductions, figuring that Hamo and he hadn't met before.

Raider looked a little uncomfortable.

"Look, Farlander," he said. "Everybody's getting a little edgy. Losses are piling up, and replacements aren't coming in fast enough. But we think that you got a raw deal. I've watched you pilot a fighter, and I'd personally go up with you again any time."

I sat there pretty well floored. I still felt like a murderer, but at least I was a murderer with friends.

"Let me buy you a drink, captain," said Hamo.

After a rocky start, my friendship with Sam Raider grew. He and Hamo and I began spending a great deal of time together. The inquest came and went, and I was returned to active duty with a warning and a compulsory visit to TIE-Die and his simulators for some specific brushing up. The incident passed, and, like many situations that seem to offer nothing but tragedy, some good came of it. I cleared my head a little, gained back my self-respect, and made a new friend.

But I couldn't bring back Cardacs, Tan'tro, or Ahsmar. I'd learned that people die in battle, sometimes even people close to you, but I didn't think I would ever get used to it.

My next two missions were solo missions: No wingmen.

OP 4: Capture Stolen Freighter

Straight by the book, standard mission start. Cycled through the target list and decided to go after the nearest transport. I selected torpedoes and, as I closed to firing range, the transport opened up with ion cannons on the freighter. I passed right by two of the shuttles as I got a lock and fired, and then switched back to laser cannons to finish off the TRN.

As soon as the transport blew up, another dropped out of hyperspace. I figured that if the new one was going to make the same attempt to disable the freighter, I'd let him proceed and save myself the trouble. I launched a couple of torpedoes at the freighter to help the process along.

The other transport probably had the boarding party, so I targeted that one next. I intended to use the same strategy - a torpedo followed by a few laser blasts - but while I strove for a solid lock, I was getting hammered by the shuttles, which were shooting me from behind.

Each had eight forward-facing laser cannons, firing four at a time, so even as I stretched the distance between us, they didn't have to be very accurate to hit me. I was just moments from achieving a lock on my target, however, so I held on just long enough to fire the torpedo, and then broke off and went into

evasive maneuvers, rebalancing my shields and redirecting power to them quickly.

I was able to shake my tormentors long enough to finish off the transport with a few blasts of laser fire. Again, a replacement dropped out of hyperspace almost immediately. I realized that I was going to have to get rid of the shuttles sooner or later anyway, and it might as well be sooner.

The situation was a little challenging at first: Although they're relatively slow compared to a Y-wing, shuttles are very maneuverable. I couldn't slow down to get a bead on one of them without risking exposing myself to fire from one of the others. But my superior speed kept me out of harm's way while I destroyed most of them. From then on, the battle was routine. There were still a couple of Imperial transports, so I went after them next.

The freighter had been disabled by this time, and the Alliance shuttle Wilsey had arrived to board and capture the Phoenix. This phase of the operation took a few minutes, during which I patrolled the area. All was quiet, and I was figuring on a peaceful end to this mission. On the other hand, I kept my speed up and my guns and shields charged, just in case I needed to get going in a hurry. After the freighter was under our control, the Wilsey departed and the Phoenix got under way.

No sooner had the Wilsey made it into hyperspace than a Star Destroyer popped up! Almost immediately, it launched a group of three TIE fighters (Alpha), which I sped off at maximum speed to intercept. As I did so, it launched a group of three TIE Bombers (Gamma). These would have to be stopped first.

As it happened, I was able to eliminate two of T/F Alpha in a head-on pass while speeding toward T/B Gamma. There was another launch of three TIE fighters (Beta), but I ignored these as I concentrated on destroying the Bombers with my torpedoes and cannons.

After Gamma was eliminated, however, another wave was launched to replace them. I attacked the new Bomber group, and then kept after the TIEs until the Phoenix finally made it into hyperspace, and I received the Mission Complete message.

Before I could safely disengage, I had to take out any enemy fighters that might shoot me in the back as I tried to leave. This strategy took some time, but eventually I was able to break away and head for home. Before I left, however, I fired a torpedo at the STD Intrepid, just to spite them.

When I heard that Mon Mothma was back on board, I hurried to contact Lynia. I caught up with her as she was coming out of a High Command meeting, along with General Madine, whom I had never met, Admiral Ackbar and Dodonna, among others.

"It's good to see you," I told her.

Her smile made me feel better than I had in weeks. She began to speak, and then stopped herself and looked at me as though seeing something new. Had I grown a wart on my nose or something?

"How are you, Keyan!" she asked. "You look different..."

I had no idea what she was talking about, but before I could respond, Mon Mothma came out of the meeting room, followed by a gold-colored protocol droid. It wasn't often one caught a glimpse of the Alliance head of state, and it was even less common for her to come over to chat, but that's what she did.

"Lieutenant... Oh, make that Captain Farlander, it's good to see you again."

She held out her hand. Rather timidly, I took it, not sure whether I should shake it, kiss it, or just sort of bow over it. OK. I had a hard time being comfortable with her. I was just an ordinary pilot, after all, and ordinary pilots didn't consort with galactic leaders. Besides, the last time I talked with her, she had told me a lot of stuff I didn't want to hear. Things about the Force... and destiny.

"Ma'am," I managed, taking her hand and releasing it quickly.

Now Mon Mothma studied me the way Lynia had done before. What was it? Maybe I was turning purple from eating too much porf.

"You've grown up, captain," was what Mon Mothma concluded. I was grateful that I wasn't turning purple.

"I guess so, ma'am. It's the war. You can't stay young for long. The young die young." I didn't really know what I was saying, but it sounded pretty good.

"Have you done as I suggested!" Mon Mothma asked me.

"I'm sorry. What was that!"

"Have you found someone to instruct you in the Force!"

"Ma'am, I've been instructed in all kinds of things, and I'm certainly becoming familiar with some force or other, but as to the Force..."

She smiled, probably seeing right through me.

"Keep your eyes open and your mind clear, captain. One day you'll meet someone strong in the Force, and you'll know it. Take it in. Absorb it as much as you can. Never waste your gifts. Take care, captain. And be good to Lynia. She's very special, too. And she likes you, you know."

With that, Mon Mothma winked at me and walked away. I think I was so shocked to see the head of the entire Rebel Alliance - one of the most powerful beings in the galaxy - wink at me, that I was a little slow to notice that Lynia was standing there, turning a rather hot shade of crimson. So she wasn't unflappable after all, I thought. But then, look at me.

Lynia and I managed to have some time together that night. We ate dinner in the executive dining room. They didn't call it a "mess" like the pilots did, and I could see why. The whole thing looked like something surface-side, not what we were used to on a starship. The tables were covered with fabric of some kind, soft yet apparently resistant to staining - as I found out when I spilled some Veronian wine. The plates were bright and clean and felt fragile and precious. Even the food was something that made me instantly forget about porf or mugruebe stew.

I don't want to give the impression that the executive dining room was extravagant, and in all honesty the menu wasn't so different from ours. It was the preparation. You could tell that the food here was made in individual portions; not in big vats of 40 servings at a time, ladled onto metallic trays in an assembly line. All right, so rank had its privileges.

"Mon Mothma seems quite interested in you, Keyan," said Lynia over a delicate bite of angel hair chintassa grass.

"Don't worry, Lynia. She's not my type."

She looked at me strangely at first, and then realized that I was joking and persisted.

"No, really, Keyan. She's not fanciful. If she sees something, you should pay attention. What exactly did she tell you!"

"Oh, nothing really. Something about the Force. It didn't make much sense to me."

"Oh," she said. "I see."

I got the feeling that she was sort of disappointed for some reason.

Just to change the subject, I asked; "Lynia, just exactly what is it you do!"

I had been wanting to know this for so long, but for some reason had always been reluctant to bring it up.

"Oh, I just observe things for Mon Mothma," she said coyly.

"What does that mean, 'observe things'!"

"I have certain... abilities... with ideas. It's hard to explain. My ancestors were a little... different."

"Different!" I persisted. "What do you mean!"

I waited for her to go on, but she seemed to have said all she was planning to say for the moment. Her one answer had only created a hundred new questions, but I found myself suddenly shy about probing further. Perhaps someday she would tell me more - when she was ready.

We ate in silence for a moment. Then, to break the tension, I asked; "What brings you and Mon Mothma to the Independence then!"

She smiled, obviously happier to be on safe, impersonal ground again.

"We're meeting with the High Command to set up an important operation. It has something to do with Imperial communications. I'm sure you'll learn more about it soon."

"No doubt, I will. As my friend Hamo says, 'You plan it; we man it.'"

She laughed and asked; "How is your friend Hamo!"

"He's very well. He made commander, but he seems kind of uncomfortable with it. He hasn't told me exactly how he got his promotion."

I got the distinct impression that she knew more about this than she was letting on. All she said was, "I'm sure he'll tell you when he's ready."

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly, and the next day Lynia was gone again with Mon Mothma.

OP 5: Protect Captured Satellites

I was under immediate attack from two TIE Interceptors (Alpha) and two TIE Bombers (Beta), so I had to begin evasive maneuvers the moment I dropped out of hyperspace, carrying out abbreviated start procedures as I evaded. They had me at four-to-one odds, and the TIE Bombers were launching missiles, which I did my best to outmaneuver.

The Intrepid had already begun launching additional fighters, so the odds were going to get worse soon enough. I took out one of the Interceptors, came up behind one of the Bombers (controlling my speed), and sent a missile directly up its engine port.

I handled the second Interceptor then, and finally the other Bomber. As soon as I had destroyed the second Bomber, a replacement wave was launched from the Star Destroyer. Meanwhile, the new fighters were coming into range. First came a single Interceptor from Delta Squadron, and, coming up behind him, another from Zeta.

The Star Destroyer continued to launch TIEs in ones and twos. (Maybe they had some problem in the hangar bay?) Only once did one get by me. I quickly redirected all power to the engines and took off after him. I switched to missiles to take him out before he could do much harm. He did manage to make one attack run on the Phoenix before my missile caught him. Luckily, he wasn't a Bomber.

Finally, the Intrepid stopped launching TIEs. Then, when the Maximus arrived with the freighter Ojai, the Star Destroyer simply departed. Could it be that the Intrepid is suffering an acute shortage of star fighters or pilots?

We sat around the lounge, a bunch of pilots, doing what we loved to do - talk about starfighters and flying them.

"What's your favorite target!" Raider asked me.

"My favorite? That's a hard question to answer. I guess a TIE Bomber might qualify. I mean, it's not that I like them at all. In fact, I hate them. But I always have to target them before they get me or the ships I'm protecting."

"How do you fight the Bombers!" asked a new pilot, a Sullustan we called Speedy because we couldn't pronounce his name. He had just earned his wings and gone out on two tough missions. The fact that he was still here meant that he showed promise.

"You try to get them from a distance, with torpedoes or missiles. If you have to use cannons, put shields and cannons to max, and then come up from behind and blast away. If you're in a hurry..."

"If you've got shields," interrupted Raider, "just ram 'em."

The Sullustan's oversized eyes seemed to grow even wider, if that was possible.

"Me," interjected Hamo, "I like to go one-on-one with a TIE Interceptor."

Raider laughed, and said; "Really? They're too easy. I mean, they always seem to think they can outrun our lasers. Haven't you noticed how they turn after an

attack run and vector directly away from you? As if our X-wings and A-wings couldn't keep up!"

"Yeah," conceded Hamo. "But they usually have better pilots than the TIE fighters."

"Those are my favorites," said Jan-lo, grinning. "I just like how easy it is to blast them."

"My last mission, I caught a TIE with a fantastic shot," said Naeco, one of the new veteran transfers. As he spoke, he used his hands to demonstrate the action he was describing. "I'd slowed down to blast a TIE Bomber, and this TIE fighter comes up behind me too fast. I caught him coming on the rear sensor, and just pushed my nose down a little. Then, as he came over me, I raised the nose and squirted a laser blast. He went nova on one hit. It was a beautiful deflection."

"I hate the Gunboats," said Speedy. "One jumped out of hyperspace right behind me on my last mission. Just about scared the scarns out of me."

"Scarns!" Both Hamo and I asked at once.

"Yeah," Speedy answered. "Scarns. You know..."

I didn't know, but I decided not to press the issue. Hamo just nodded as though he had just remembered what scarns were, but I was sure that he was bluffing.

"Gunboats are tough, but they're slow," said Raider, smiling inscrutably. Did he know what scarns were? "They're a nuisance, but you've got the advantage of speed and maneuverability. Me, I like to shoot a container. Just sits there, doesn't shoot back."

We laughed. Every one of us could agree with that.

"Oh, come on, Samuel," said Hamo. "You're kidding, right!"

"Yeah. Well, those chemical containers sometimes blow up nicely. Pretty colors, eh Speedy!"

"Actually, we see in a different range from you humans. I guess we probably have different esthetics."

"Different esthetics, is it? Hey, to me an explosion is an explosion."

"Yes," answered Speedy. "But to me, a human is a human."

None of us knew exactly what that meant, but the Sullustan was smiling, so we figured that it was a joke and laughed.

"The truth is, I like to shoot up corvettes," said Raider a moment later. "Maybe someday, I'd like to tackle a Star Destroyer."

"You're crazy," said Naeco. "You can't take on a Star Destroyer in a fighter. Stick to something five or ten times your own size."

"Yeah. Just give me 20-to-1 odds, and I'm a happy spacer," said Raider, winking across the table at me and Hamo.

"Me, I like a nice, dense minefield," said Hamo. "Or maybe a cross fire between two Nebulon Frigates."

Speedy was beginning to look a little nervous. Then the mission call indicator came on, and a klaxon blared. We all scrambled for the briefing room.

OP 6: Ambush in the Cron Drift

After a standard mission-start procedure, I assigned my wingman (Naeco) and the other three friendly ships to memory locations in the targeting computer. Less than a minute after we arrived, a pair of Assault Gunboats (Mu) appeared about three clicks behind us, and we turned to engage. I ordered Naeco to assist me with the lead 'Boat.

I decided to make some adjustments from my normal firing mode, and changed the cannons to quad-fire-linked and then switched to torpedoes. I fired as soon as I had a solid lock, and then targeted Mu 2. Immediately after launching my next torpedo, I switched back to cannons and quickly destroyed the target.

Another pair of Gunboats arrived, followed shortly by a transport. Since a transport can be armed with torpedoes, I saw it as a serious threat to the Ojai and the Jeffrey. I left my wingman to finish off Mu 1, and took off after the interloper.

I brought up the transport in the CMD and switched back to torpedoes. Since it was about six clicks away, I redirected everything to the engines and got my speed up to 150. As soon as the targeting computer began locking on, I reset the recharge rates to maximum. I decided that I would use the same method which had worked on Mu 2.

Unfortunately, the transport was able to launch one of its torpedoes at the Ojai before I could completely close the gap, though I then made the ship pay the ultimate penalty for its transgression.

Next, I targeted the nearest enemy fighter, GUN Mu 2, part of a replacement wave for the original Mu group. As I engaged it with cannons, another transport arrived about nine clicks away. Mu 2 was almost dead, so I stuck to it a moment longer before locating the new transport, and heading off after it.

I followed the same tactics and procedure as before, but this transport was farther away, and was able to get off two torpedoes before I could take it out. Also, during the chase, a Gunboat fired a missile at me that I couldn't take the time to evade! The missile hit me right after the transport blew up, but my shields were charged and my ship withstood the hit. I quickly rebalanced and recharged my shields. The Magnus made it into hyperspace after that, leaving me with one less ship to worry about.

Mu 1 was the nearest enemy now, so I turned to engage him with cannons. I was just starting to hit him when another transport came in about five clicks away. I broke off to engage the transport, intending to use the same tactics as before, and right away R2 indicated that I had another missile homing in on me.

I let it hit me, and, as I was balancing the shields, Mu 1 began blasting me with lasers. Then the R2 gave me another missile warning. The new transport was still some distance away, and my shields were getting pretty thin, so I did some weaving this time. I straightened out and destroyed the transport as before,

taking another missile hit in the process. R2 made a plaintive "bleep," and I decided that it was time for Mu 1 to die. Yet another transport arrived as I was finishing him off.

I targeted the new transport about seven clicks away. As I headed toward it, another replacement wave for GUN Mu arrived, but they were a good nine clicks distant.

Using my now-standard procedure, I launched a torpedo at my target, and was surprised to see it sail astray! I would have to kill this transport with lasers, and as quickly as possible. I reduced speed by raising both shield and cannon recharge rates to maximum, and then began firing.

Something must have glitched with that torpedo I'd fired, because it missed in a second pass. Finally, my cannons did the job the torp had neglected, and I turned toward the nearest Gunboat, Mu 2. My wingman and I proceeded to destroy the Gunboats as fast as we could get on their tails.

Finally, Ojai had completed docking, and we just kept dogfighting while we waited for the Jeffrey to leave the area. A new Gunboat group arrived from Tau squadron. Soon afterward, I saw the Mission Complete message, but I wanted to bag a few more Gunboats. GUN Tau must have had some rookies, 'cause some of them went back into hyperspace as soon as they saw us coming! Eventually, no enemy ships were left, and we went home.

The practical jokes began soon after Naeco joined Red Squadron. Little things, like Naeco would come talk to you while you ate, and the next day your pee would glow in the dark! Or you would be strapped into the simulators and absorbed in a dogfight exercise, and a feminine voice would begin talking seductively over the comm. Things like that.

Naeco was an excellent pilot - a little reckless sometimes, but a superb deflection shooter. We all liked him immediately, but after falling victim to his little jokes, a bunch of us decided to get revenge.

One day, Jan-lo struck up a conversation with Naeco, sort of showing a little more than ordinary interest. We could all tell that Naeco liked Jan-lo, so she

had no trouble getting him to agree to meet her later in a storage area of the Quarren section.

"It'll be more private," she told him. "Be sure to wear something comfortable."

Naeco was like a little kid; all excited. After Jan-lo departed, he approached me.

"Hey, Farlander. You know Jan-lo better than anyone else. Tell me about her. What's she really like!"

"Jan-lo? She likes a man to be really aggressive," I said, setting him up. "Don't waste time with her, or she'll lose interest."

I almost felt bad at that point, seeing him this way, but then I figured that he had it coming.

Later, Naeco went down into the Quarren section, where it's always kind of dark, opened the door to Storage Room V-2117 and walked in. Our little group huddled in a corner observantly.

"Jan-lo? You here!"

"Over here," she answered. "Come here and kiss me, Naeco."

She sounded really seductive. "This is a different Jan-lo," I thought.

So the poor guy walked up to what he thought was Jan-lo - it was really dark, remember, so he couldn't see very well - and planted this big kiss. Only, of course, that it wasn't on her.

Just then, Raider turned on the lights and we saw Naeco, lips puckered in the direction of a Quarren who works in the kitchen. Good sport, the Quarren, to go along with our twisted little revenge plot.

So there's Naeco, wiping his mouth and looking around, blinking in the sudden light. He saw us all, and joker that he is, realized immediately that he had gotten what he deserved. Laughing, and being a remarkably good sport about the whole thing, Naeco went so far as to grab the Quarren again, and plant another kiss, saying; "Sorry Jan-lo. I guess I've been taken."

We all ended up laughing, even the Quarren, although its laughter sounded like plumbing backing up.

After that, the practical jokes eased up a bit, though I think we all kept one eye out for Naeco. You never knew.

OP 7: Protect a Disabled X-wing

I used the standard mission-start procedure, and then assigned X-W Blue to a memory location in the targeting computer. Just over a minute went by before two groups of three Gunboats came in (Mu and Nu) about three clicks away. I turned to engage the nearest one and ordered my wingmen to attack.

I had destroyed one of the Gunboats (Mu 1) when an Imperial shuttle arrived less than one click away, headed straight for X-W Blue. I ordered my wingmen to attack. When I checked the map, I saw that Red 3 was getting battered by Nu 1, so I targeted Nu 1 and came to the rescue while Red 2 finished off the shuttle.

Another shuttle came in, and I ordered my wingmen to engage it. The dogfight was getting pretty furious, with the Gunboats launching missiles constantly. A few of them had hit me, and Red 3 caught one, but Red 2 was doing pretty well.

As soon as the shuttle was disposed of, another dropped in to take its place. Red 3 finally succumbed to another missile, but Red 2 and I were able to get this last shuttle. No sooner had we done so than the shuttle Rescue arrived, with its escort of three corvettes.

We turned our attention to the remaining Gunboats: There seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of them. Eventually, X-W Blue was repaired, and jumped to safety. After our shuttle and X-W Blue made it out, we followed them home.

C.O.'s Analysis

"It was an adequate mission, but you didn't take advantage of the safety area near the corvettes," Lagrane was saying. "Their extra cannons would have

made an excellent killing zone to draw the Imperial fighters into. It would also have made you a much more difficult target to get a missile lock on."

"I lost another wingman, too," I offered, still a tittle baffled at how that happened.

"Yes, you did. Mission analysis suggests that Red 3 failed to rebalance shields after that first missile hit him. It wasn't your fault, captain. However, destroying the shuttles quickly is important to your success. You might also have tried killing the shuttles more quickly by hitting them with two salvos of dual-fire missiles. That would leave them weak, and you could finish them off quickly with cannons."

"Sir!"

"What is it, captain? something bothering you!"

"Well..." I began. Losing another wingman was bothering me, but what more could I say?

"I guess not, sir," I said at last. "Is that all!"

Lagrane studied me a moment, seemed about to say something, and then just told me; "Nothing more, Farlander. You're dismissed."

The pilot we had rescued in X-wing Blue turned out to be Biggs Darklighter, a veteran of many Alliance battles, and he joined us in the lounge after finishing his debriefing. It was quiet. Most of the other pilots were on scout or escort missions. Just me and Raider and Darklighter, who was doing most of the talking.

"So when I left Tatooine," he was saying, "I joined the Imperial Academy. I used to dream about flying a starfighter. My friend Luke and I were going to leave together - seek our fortunes in the Imperial Academy - but he had to stay behind and help his uncle on their moisture farm. He'd make a great pilot, Luke would, if he could just get off that dirty little planet."

Darklighter was a medium-built man with dark, straight hair that fell like a round bowl over his head. He had happy eyes, the kind that laughed a lot, and he sported a mustache.

"I couldn't wait for Luke. I went off alone and began my training. But I could see almost immediately that the Empire and I weren't going to get along. So, with a couple of friends, I hijacked an Imperial starship and brought it over to the Alliance."

He smiled and spread his hands. "It was touch and go. They almost blasted us away before we could convince them that we were just three Rebel sympathizers flying this whole ship by ourselves. Since then, I've been flying X-wings for the Alliance."

Darklighter paused to take a drink, leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs.

"So what's it like to fly a TIE fighter!" I asked. I had always wondered how the Imperial pilots felt about flying without shields and all.

"I tell you, captain..."

"Call me Keyan, please."

"OK. Anyway, Keyan, I wouldn't climb into one of those death traps again for love or money. You're just waiting for someone to catch you with a laser blast. Let me tell you, most TIE pilots are at least half-scared to death. The others are too stupid to be scared."

We laughed. It made us feel good to hear how bad the other guys had it. But Darklighter wasn't finished.

"Don't get me wrong. In the right hands, a TIE fighter has good maneuverability and fair speed. But the Empire doesn't invest all that much in training its pilots. The ones that get good are the ones who survive their first few encounters. Unfortunately for them, a lot of TIE fighter pilots don't."

"What about the newer Imperial ships, like the TIE Interceptor!" I asked him.

"Good question. I never flew one," he said thoughtfully, then added with a chuckle; "But I've shot a lot of them."

"They're faster, and more maneuverable than other TIEs," he continued. "They carry more weaponry, too. I've never had too much trouble with them, though, unless the odds were about ten to one."

"I always figured ten to one was pretty routine," said Raider.

Darklighter stared at Raider a moment, and then grinned. "I was just trying to be modest," he said. "Hope I get to fly with you some time, captain."

"Call me Sam," Raider told him.

"Hey, Keyan, Sam: Enough shop talk. I've got some new holos from Celanon City. Come on. We'll go check them out."

OP 8: Stop Hyperdrive Replacement

I used the standard mission-start procedure, as the patrolling TIE fighters came right for us when we popped out of hyperspace. My escorts turned toward the nearest pair (Beta), and I joined them in a head-on attack. Soon, Alpha joined the melee, and I fought my way toward the nearest freighter.

Before we could take care of all the fighters, a two-ship group of TIE Interceptors from Delta squadron was launched from the Intrepid. A minute later, a four-ship group from Theta squadron was also dispatched.

About four minutes into the mission, I made it to the first freighter, the Kiam IV. It was loaded with machinery, so I continued toward the next in a counterclockwise rotation around the ring. Another pair of TIE Interceptors, these from Zeta squadron, joined the fray at that point.

The next freighter was Kiam III, which had hyperdrive spares, so I switched to torpedoes and selected dual-fire mode. Since I was so close, I didn't bother waiting for the targeting computer; I just fired them point-blank as fast as they would launch. That was the end of that freighter, and I set off toward the next.

The Kiam II was loaded with supplies, so I passed it up.

Another pair of Interceptors launched, from Gamma squadron this time. I was constantly weaving to evade all these TIEs, and, even with the recharge rates at maximum, my shields were slipping.

Next was the Kiam V, carrying more hyperdrive parts. I tagged it in memory and decided that it was time to reduce the number of Interceptors hounding me.

I proceeded to engage and destroy several of my pursuers, while circling the Kiam V and firing on it as opportunities arose. After destroying the Kiam V, I headed off toward the last freighter. I received the Mission Complete message before I got close enough to ID it, though, so I withdrew as soon as I had fully recharged my shields and headed for home.

C.O.'s Analysis

I slumped in the chair in the debriefing room. Lagrane was looking me over critically. I could feel his eyes on me, but I couldn't meet them. I was feeling discouraged, despite my success. I had simply run out of energy, and there was no source to replenish it. Lagrane began his analysis of the mission.

"It was very risky to use all six torpedoes like that on the first freighter with the hyperdrive spares. You couldn't know how many of the five would have to be destroyed. As it turned out, there was only one other, but at that point you were in the middle of a hornet's nest of TIE Interceptors!

"You really had a hard time keeping your shields up, and constantly shunting cannon power to the shields was robbing you of the maximum effect of your lasers. Keeping your recharge rates at maximum forced your speed down to 50. You were asking for trouble, captain.

"Our analysis of the mission suggests that you should have redirected the shield energy to the engines and kept your speed up to at least 100. You would still have had to transfer cannon power to the shields constantly, but you would have been better able to evade your attackers, and as a result you would have lost less energy overall by better avoiding their cannon blasts.

"You know, Farlander, every pilot is only human. Don't take this too hard, but I see that your concentration seems below par. You're feeling the pressure, aren't you!"

I nodded.

"Now don't take this personally, captain, but I think you need to take a little time off."

"No, Commander. Wait. I'll be all right. It's just... I've been having these dreams."

"Dreams!" Lagrane asked.

"They've been going on for a few weeks. It's like a war is taking place in my head at night."

"Look, Farlander, I'm not equipped to deal with your dreams. You report to Sick Bay and see what you can do about it. If you don't get focused, I'm going to have to put you on inactive."

"Yes sir. I understand. Don't worry. I'll visit the med droids and see what they can do."

"Good afternoon, Captain Farlander. Please describe your symptoms." The droid spoke in a pleasant voice, designed to make you feel at ease. Even so, I was nervous.

"I'm having strange dreams, and I'm not getting enough sleep."

"You're having dreams," repeated the droid. "Tell me about your dreams."

"Well," I began, somewhat reluctantly. "I'm always in a glowing sphere, and I have the feeling that it's very large."

"A sphere. Go on," said the droid.

"And there are voices," I continued.

"Tell me about the voices."

"I don't really understand them. I get bits and pieces, but I can't quite grasp the thoughts."

"Bits and pieces, nothing more," responded the droid.

"All I know is that there are two voices, and they're completely the opposite of each other. I think if I knew which one to listen to, I'd feel better."

"Tell me about feeling better," the droid requested.

"I'd feel a whole lot better if you'd stop asking questions, and give me something to help me sleep."

"One moment, please."

The droid wheeled out of the small cubicle, and I waited. And waited. Finally, an older woman entered the room, followed by the droid, or perhaps one that looked just like it.

"M4 here tells me you've got some attitude problems," the woman said.

"Maybe I can help."

She was probably about 60 years old, gray hair, cerulean blue eyes. She seemed a little put out, as if I was intruding.

"Look, doctor... You are a doctor, aren't you!" I asked.

The woman nodded and offered a concerned smile, saying; "We're here to help you, captain."

She was treating me like some kind of a mental case, and my danger signals began flashing accordingly. I didn't want to end up on the inactive list. I took a deep breath and said; "Doctor, I've just had some bad dreams... the war, you know. But I'm fine. I just wanted to get something to help me get a few good sleeps. I think M4 there misinterpreted what I said."

The doctor looked dubious, so I repeated myself, adding a good-natured chuckle for emphasis:

"I'm fine, doctor. Everything is fine."

I can admit this now, but I never would have mentioned it to anyone back then. I felt something connect between me and the doctor. I felt my will reaching out to her; convincing her of what I was saying. It was the first time I had ever felt anything like that - like my will was actually emanating from me as a conscious force - and just as quickly I made a conscious effort to somehow shut it off.

By that time, however, the deed was done.

"Captain Farlander is fine, M4. He just needs a few good sleeps. Give him some sedatives and recommend him for active duty." And she smiled at me: a warm, sincere smile.

"It was good to meet you, captain. Good luck." Then she turned and left.

I made it back from Sick Bay just in time to grab an assignment.

OP 9: Take Out Intrepid's Escort

It promised to be a great mission. We hyperspaced into the area - Raider, Hamo, and I - ready for action, and certain to see plenty of it. Our escort, Captain Marskan, in X-wing Blue, arrived a moment later.

I ordered X-W Blue to wait while we built up our shields, meanwhile targeting the nearest Gunboat, Mu 3. As soon as we were fully charged, I ordered my wingmen to attack Mu 3, then ordered our escort to resume his mission.

I felt that if we could lure some of the Imperial fighters out to fight us, away from the corvettes, we could destroy them more easily. The Empire's pilots proved quite cooperative in that regard, and, with the assistance of my wingmen, I was able to wipe them out, one group after the other.

Finally, the three corvettes were alone, and I took up a position outside their cannon range. I cut my throttle to zero, and then switched to torpedoes, selecting the dual-fire mode.

I targeted the middle (lead) ship of the Vic formation, and ordered my wingmen to do the same. By removing the lead ship first, the other two were left with a blind spot that had previously been covered.

I launched as soon as I had a lock, and then targeted the next corvette and fired another pair of torpedoes at it. My wingmen had each fired two torpedoes at the first corvette, and it was soon destroyed. I then targeted the third corvette, and fired my remaining four torpedoes into it.

I retargeted the second corvette at that point, so that I could order my wingmen to attack it. As soon as they acknowledged, I switched back to lasers and made a final attack run on the third corvette, coming in at full throttle. My wingmen finished off the last one on their own.

X-W Blue was of little help, frequently targeting the same ship I had. This led to my being hit by his lasers several times! Since he failed to account for a single kill, I see no justification for what appeared to be a reckless disregard for our safety.

C.O.'s Analysis

"Captain, didn't I tell you to see the medics!"

"Yessir. I did, sir."

"Good."

I noticed with relief that the commander seemed to consider the issue closed.

Ill must say you handled yourself well in this mission. An excellent job. We've got some other suggestions for attacking corvettes, but they haven't been tested.

"We think you might be able to concentrate on the gun emplacement on one side of a corvette. Once it was taken out, you could attack from that angle without fear of reprisal. However, our analysis also suggests that the corvette might roll before it was completely disabled, bringing you into point-blank range of the guns on the opposite side. Needless to say, you should be very careful, and stay alert, if you try this technique. Back off from the corvette when its shields go down, and finish it from a distance."

"Again, your performance was very good. However, X-wing Blue did very poorly."

"I don't know what got into Marskan. He's never been so erratic," I agreed.

"This was a very difficult mission, and your success was marred by X-W Blue's performance. He arrived late, and was reckless in combat, endangering the very ships he was charged with protecting. Rest assured, he will receive an official reprimand."

"Listen, commander... Marskan's a good pilot... I just hope he's OK."

"I would think that you'd be pretty angry with him," said Lagrane.

"I am," I said. "But I also know that we all make mistakes."

Lagrane nodded, understanding me.

Tinian on Trial

Tinian I'att, the granddaughter and heiress of I'att Armament's founders, wrinkled her nose and tried not to breathe too deeply. The factory complex's demonstration room smelled like scorched meat and chemicals. She could identify five ... no, seven formulas by their odors, a potentially catastrophic witch's brew. Occasionally, the demonstration explosives detonated harder, faster, or earlier than anyone anticipated, and even quadruple transparisteel didn't provide full protection.

Standing beside Grandfather Strephan, Daye Azur-Jamin rested his hand on a waist-high blast barricade. Daye's I'att Armament gray tunic accentuated his air of authority. So did the management comlink he wore on his belt. A prematurely gray streak marked the center of Daye's left eyebrow. "There's nothing patently wrong with stormtrooper armor, your excellency," he said, and Tinian admired his self-control. She knew how Daye felt about Grandfather's Imperial connections. "But a good marksman -- or an idiot with a high-powered blaster -- can pick out weak spots. Our field makes it invulnerable."

Imperial Moff Eisen Kerioth slapped a polished ebony swagger stick into one palm. Tall and lean, Moff Kerioth held his head thrust forward over an astonishing array of red and blue rank squares. Tinian, Daye, and her grandparents had expected tech advisors for this demonstration, and maybe a few army troopers, but never a Sector Moff with stormtrooper escort. Kerioth

limped, favoring a stiff left leg and occasionally leaning on the swagger stick. "Sounds wonderful, boy. So why did your demonstration employee turn coward?"

Grandfather Strephan's old black Imperial service uniform set off his thick white hair. Grandmother Augusta fiddled with a side hem of her long green robe. She'd recently developed a rare degenerative syndrome, and Druckenwell's top bioimmunal specialist gave her only months to live unless she sought treatment. It wasn't available here in Il Avali, or at any other city on Druckenwell ... and it was expensive. Behind Grandmother Augusta, the I'att family's Wookiee bodyguard Wrrlevgebev lounged against a pebbly gray duracrete wall. Wrrl rumbled a quick comment under his breath that only Tinian -- who'd studied his language -- could translate.

She didn't, but she shared Wrrl's disdain for cowardly employees. She fiddled with a collection of paraphernalia in her jumpsuit pocket: neka nut shells, droid adjustment tools, and her secret good-luck piece.

She would need all her good luck today. If I'att Armament sold its new armor-protective field, then her grandparents could retire, and she and Daye would take over the factory.

Kerioth straightened his shoulders and neck, then poked Grandfather with his swagger stick. "Well, I'att? Who's going to get into that armor? We came a long way to see this." Evidently Grandfather had known the Moff years ago. Each man had chosen his own way to serve the New Order: Grandfather by protecting Imperial might, Kerioth by wielding it. Kerioth crooked a finger at Wrrl. "You. Wookiee. Come down here."

Wrrl curled back his lips from huge teeth and let out a punctuated howl. Kerioth had demanded that the I'atts disarm their Wookiee during his visitation, and Wrrl was already irritated. A red-blond stripe crossed Wrrl's face, fur almost the same shade as Tinian's shoulder-length hair. It was odd coloration for a Wookiee.

"What did he say, Tinian?" Grandfather's business acumen showed in the way he measured and accommodated the Moff. By comparison, Kerioth seemed ...

Tinian tried to emulate her observant grandfather. Kerioth seemed blunt. And condescending.

She glanced at the shell pieces on the arming table. Eighteen white units lay beside the limp halves of a two-piece black body glove. Wrrl wouldn't fit inside the body glove, let alone the field. "Your excellency, he's too big," she translated. "The field nodes maximize at one point eight six meters of height and one meter of width."

Moll Kerioth lifted a narrow black eyebrow. "I'att, tell me again why your grandchild attends classified demonstrations."

Tinian bristled. She might be small and thin, but she was no child. Hadn't Kerioth noticed her company jumpsuit?

Grandfather laid a warm hand on her arm. "Your excellency, Tinian is an invaluable team member. She has amazing instincts for explosives."

One stormtrooper stood at the center of the second seating row up. "Sir," he said through his helmet filter, "if the Wookiee's too tall, what about her?"

Tinian blanched. Her ... demonstrate? Stand in the wave trap and get shot at? "From one extreme to the other," quipped Kerioth. "Invaluable team member, is she?" Grandfather backed toward a code panel. From this wall, he could lower two quadruple-transparisteel blast walls between the wave trap and the four broad rows of retractable shielded seating.

"Ah ... yes, but Tinian is not our demonstration volunteer."

Kerioth shifted his weight. "She would fit. Are you totally confident that your armor is impervious to blaster fire?"

"Totally," murmured Grandfather.

"Then prove it."

"But :.. no. I shall call for a line droid."

"I perceive a certain lack of confidence." Moff Kerioth directed the taunt at his stormtroopers, but Tinian took it in the gut. Grandfather and Grandmother

must reach that of fworld health care facility. Love focused Tinian's courage, and so did her hopes. The field worked. She'd seen it tested.

"Grandfather?" She raised a hand. "I'll volunteer."

Grandfather, Grandmother, and Daye stepped forward, speaking simultaneously: "Wait -- " "Tinian -- " "No -- "

Wrrl blinked huge blue eyes and suggested under his breath that Daye was built more like a stormtrooper than she was.

Tinian fixed Moff Kerioth with her stare. She was betting he'd act like a BlasTech Company bureaucrat she'd once met at a party -- once he'd suggested something, no other idea would suit him.

Kerioth's smile spread slowly from his thin lips to cold, dark eyes. "Very good, ah, Tinian. A true trial of I'att Armament's excellence."

Before Tinian could change her mind, she dragged Wrrl to the arming table. "Help me," she ordered him.

Her jumpsuit would easily fit inside the black body glove. She also selected the upper-body corselet, the carapace and the breastplate, which armorers dubbed the Body Bucket when worn together. She shoved them at Wrrl. Rear-mounted on the carapace, in place of the usual instrument pack, I'att Armament droids had installed a heat dissipator and the field transmitter. A single new control stood out on the breastplate.

She slipped off her shoes and slid one leg into the body glove. She'd never heard so much silence. "Grandfather," she suggested, "explain how the body glove enhances the field."

"Tinian," Grandfather pleaded.

The glove's leggings sagged on her with wrinkles all down their length. She yanked her narrow jumpsuit belt out of its loops and secured the heavy black fabric. "I've memorized the speech," she insisted. "Should I deliver it?"

Moff Kerioth rested his swagger stick on one shoulder. "Please do," he purred. Suddenly she disliked him. Daye had always insisted that he'd rather die in a noble cause than earn his living from an ignoble one, and she hoped this was

only her nerves, whining out from the spot where she was stuffing them (to keep Daye from trying to stop her), that made Kerioth look suddenly sinister.

Daye was sensitive to an energy field he called the Force. He claimed that Force-sensitive was not a healthy way to be in Emperor Palpatine's New Order, and he'd cautioned Tinian and her grandparents that the Empire had stooped to violent repression in other parts of the galaxy... but Tinian didn't believe it. I'att Armament had supplied the New Order for years, profiting handsomely.

She shrugged into the body glove's top. As she smoothed loose black fabric over the floppy mess at her waist, she drew a deep breath. "The protective field produces anti-energy bursts just out of phase with blaster fire," she began. "Zersium flecks that we've bonded into the advanced body glove --" Tinian pushed up one slack sleeve and ran the back of her hand over the other forearm "-- amplify the field. We see that as a key element of this new system - _"

"The entire system has too often proved vulnerable." Kerioth's voice rose. "Eight years ago, I had a stormtrooper escort shot to pieces around me. I've dragged this ever since." He whacked his left leg with the swagger stick. "Are you comfortable in there, child?"

I'm not a child. "I'm fine." She squared her shoulders. "I'm sorry about your leg. May I finish?"

He swung the swagger stick. "By all means."

"We have thus eliminated weak spots," she said, "long known to insurrectionist elements. I'm ready, Wrrl."

Her Wookiee lifted the breastplate and carapace. Grandmother Augusta folded trembling hands in front of her long green robe. Daye took up a position behind Tinian. If she hesitated or even flinched, she guessed he'd demand to wear the armor.

She hefted the carapace. "There is insulation and a heat dissipator built into this piece," she explained, raising the back protector so Moff Kerioth and his escorts could see inside it. A black sleeve flopped down to cover her other palm. She pushed it up, bunching fabric back toward her elbow. "For the

microsecond it takes for the field to reach full efficiency, the armor itself handles heat absorption. Insulation, plus this dissipator, almost eliminate thermal discomfort."

"Allegedly." Kerioth sounded sarcastic.

Tinian decided that she'd never please him except by demonstrating the product. Then he'd be impressed. Then he'd grant I'att Armament the most lucrative contract it'd ever earned. Thousands of stormtroopers would need this coverage. "Help me, Wrrl."

Wrrl fitted the corselet to Tinian's back and front, clamping it together at her shoulders. Tinian trusted Wrrl completely. Five years ago, she'd spotted him being beaten by a slave dealer. Bloody bunches of fur had littered the ground around the huge alien. Tinian -- barely twelve -- had dashed forward, disregarding Grandmother Augusta's protests (she could always move faster than either grandparent). She'd saved the creature's life. Little had she known that in rescuing Wrrl, she'd bought loyalty-to-the-death.

The shell pieces hung out over her shoulders. Tinian wriggled until they balanced.

Daye picked up the shoulder pauldrons, clasping them between long, sensitive hands. "Put these on, too," he murmured. The gray streak arched higher than the rest of either of his eyebrows. According to Druckenwell's strict population laws, she and Daye were too young to marry until they proved financial independence. Slender and bookish-looking with lively brown eyes, Daye had come to Il Avali to make a life for himself.

He was now officially Tinian's Second Undersupervisor and the very center of her life. She let him attach the pauldrons over her shoulders. They dangled to cover her elbows, enclosing her upper body with a loose, ill-fitting box. Field conduits clacked against each other when she turned toward Daye. If only she could reassure him --

"I know why you're doing this." He leaned close and stared down at her. "I don't like it, but I understand. No one ever calls you a coward and gets away with it." He squeezed her forearm. "Force be with you, love."

As he backed away, Tinian rotated a control on the breastplate. The first time she'd seen this field demonstrated, she'd worried at this point. The field didn't hum, buzz, sparkle, or even glimmer. "Grandfather?"

As if awakening from the dead, he raised a small luma. Tinian held out her arm to one side. He switched on the luma. No bright spot appeared on her sleeve.

"As energy encounters the anti-energy field," Grandfather said, regaining his voice, "the field responds and cancels it. We're now certain the field is operating."

"Ready, Tinian?" the Moff asked. His voice was as bland as if he were inviting her to sit down for lunch instead of ordering her out in front of a firing squad.

Tinian stalked to the wave trap, feeling ridiculous inside the enormous bucket, pauldrons, and body glove. Built like a pocket at one end of the spacious demonstration room, the wave trap's baffled duracrete walls and floor angled together to absorb unthinkable bursts of energy. Tiny shadowed pits in its walls gave evidence of past demonstrations.

At least she couldn't smell the room anymore. Even without a helmet, the odor had stopped registering several minutes ago.

Daye stood close to the barricade, frowning. She drew up tall -- for her height -- and barely smiled across at him. Wrrl edged toward the code panel.

Kerioth swept his swagger stick toward three stormtroopers. "You three. Rifles," he snapped. They marched forward. Daye held both hands down at his sides. Usually, he kept one or both casually tucked in a pocket.

Tinian stared at the blast rifles. Those weren't the shiny new factory items she generally dealt with.

Daye glared at the nearest stormtrooper.

"Ready," snapped the Moff. Three rifles lifted. "Aim for weak spots."

Kerioth turned to eye Tinian. His lip curled. Evidently he enjoyed watching the I'att contingent sweat.

She knew that the armor worked. But staring down three rifle shafts, she momentarily lost control of her panic.

Instantly, Daye's face reflected her fear. He spun toward the trooper and tentatively reached for his rifle.

"Now," Kerieth ordered.

Three vermilion energy beams whizzed at Tinian's chest. She flinched, but she couldn't dodge quickly enough. Heat flashed over her back and shoulders despite the bucket's extra insulation. Daye froze and stared, stricken.

"Cease fire." Kerieth twirled his swagger stick.

Tinian straightened back up, let out her breath, then smiled weakly at Daye. The sale was as good as made. She'd done it, though she wished she hadn't tried to duck. Daye thrust a hand into his pocket and frowned. Her momentary panic had probably jabbed him deeper than it'd frightened her.

Kerieth slipped a comlink out of his belt sheath. "Squads three, four, and five: seal entrances. No traffic or communication off grounds."

"Excuse me?" Grandfather stepped forward, obviously as confused as Tinian abruptly felt. "Sir, what is the meaning of this?"

Moff Kerieth tapped Grandfather's shoulder with his swagger stick.

"Congratulations, I'att. I am buying your product."

"You sealed our entrances."

Kerieth clasped his hands at the small of his back. "It would be unfortunate if insurrectionist elements learned that we'd found a way to make stormtrooper armor invincible, would it not?"

We found a way? Tinian silently protested.

Grandmother Augusta glided forward, rustling her robes. "Our security has always been unparalleled, Moff Kerieth. You need have no fear concerning our -- "

"*Naturally*, then," continued Moff Kerieth, "you understand that everyone who has worked above certain levels on this project must return with me to the

Doldur system. This item must be manufactured under strictly regulated conditions. The New Order controls Doldur right down to food prices. It is the safest world for advanced military manufacturing."

It's your turf, Tinian realized. You want this manufactured where you can watch.

Grandfather's eyes narrowed. "I am sorry, but this family cannot travel. Augusta needs medical care."

Tinian fingered the black body glove's sleeve selvage. "After all these years of hard work, they deserve peaceful retirement," she protested. "Daye and I are prepared to run the plant. We'll ... " She hesitated, then plunged on. It was the only way. "We'll go to Doldur with you. But Grandfather and Grandmother are retiring to Geridard."

"No," said Kerioth. "You will return to Doldur with me. All of you."

"Sir," Augusta spoke up, "I apologize for making things difficult, but our application for the Geridard Convalescent Center has already been processed. We've advanced them 90,000 credits for life care."

Kerioth turned away. He tilted his chin as if rereading the l'atts' requests off the ceiling. When he pivoted back around, his condescending smile had returned. "You will not travel to Doldur? I cannot convince you?"

"Unfortunately, sir, it's impossible." Strephan folded his arms over his black uniform's decorated breast.

"Perhaps not so unfortunate. That enables me to dispose of your retirement and health worries simultaneously." Kerioth swung his swagger stick at the nearest stormtrooper. "Take them both."

Before Tinian understood, the stormtrooper whipped up his blast rifle and fired twice. Grandfather Strephan tumbled to the duracrete. Augusta gasped before she collapsed over Strephan.

They didn't move again. Too shocked to protest, Tinian covered her mouth with both hands. Daye bent his knees, ready to lunge. "Why did you do that?" he whispered.

Kerioth angled his swagger stick like a weapon at Daye's chest. "I'll let you youngsters in on a secret," he announced. "I have been sponsoring research into this type of anti-blaster energy field on Doldur. Emperor Palpatine will be most grateful when I present this invention as my own ... with all the uncooperatives out of the way.

"You do wish to cooperate?" he asked blandly.

Grandfather! Grandmother! Stunned by her grief and horror, Tinian had to survive ... to avenge them. She nodded. *Say yes!* she mentally begged Daye.

He straightened slowly, but he didn't speak.

Kerioth shrugged. "Binders for the boy," he ordered another trooper. "How long and how comfortably you live, boy, will depend on how well you *cooperate*." He stressed the word again.

Daye adjusted his stance, turning both feet out slightly. One trooper reached into a utility-belt compartment. Tinian glanced from the trooper to Daye. Daye eyed the trooper. Daye had learned some self-defense from Wrrl. He could move faster than anyone expected.

She must create a distraction.

"Wrrl!" she cried. "Help!" She spun around and dashed for the door.

Wrrl's roar frightened even Tinian. He slammed the code panel with one gigantic paw. A transparisteel blast wall plunged out of the ceiling, trapping Kerioth and two stormtroopers on the inside.

But four troopers remained. Wrrl rushed the pair blocking the exit, lifted each by a shoulder, and bashed their helmets together. Tinian sprang through.

"Go left!" Daye shouted behind her. "Wrrl, stay with Tinian!"

Tinian whirled left and tried to run. One of her loose leggings tripped her. Blaster fire whizzed over her head. Wrrl tried to scoop her up with long shaggy arms. Fur shriveled where he touched her.

"Don't!" she cried. The field unpredictably damaged living flesh that touched it. Tinian scrambled to her feet. Wrrl sprinted past a bewildered-looking service droid. She caught a whiff of burned fur. "Daye?" she cried. "Wrrl, where's -- "

Wrrl shrieked something about separating the stormtroopers.

They reached the lift tube. Tinian jumped onto its floor grid. It didn't activate to carry her upward. "They've shut it off!" she cried. Wrrl stepped in front of her, clearly inviting her to climb onto his back.

There was no other way out of this bottleneck. Tinian switched off the armor field, vaulted up, and clenched her hands in front of Wrrl's throat, hoping nobody shot at them. Singed, matted fur brushed her face. The stormtrooper-sized breastplate dug into her stomach.

Wrrl leaped up the shaft wall, catching enormous claws -- she hadn't even known that he had claws! -- in its duracrete sides. Powerful muscles rippled under Tinian's hold. She clenched her knees around his sides, trying to keep her weight from choking him.

He dragged his weight and hers up to the main floor. A security droid rolled toward them, four claw-mounted blasters and scanners installed atop a perfectly balanced sphere. It endlessly repeated, "Halt! Drop all weapons! Halt --"

Tinian gulped a deep breath. "Recognition," she shouted over Wrrl's shoulder. Her voice ought to shut it off ...

"Confirmed." The droid spun in place. It retreated, still broadcasting.

Daylight shone through the southeastern service door. Another pair of stormtroopers crouched beside it, obviously alerted over Kerioth's comlink. "Freeze," ordered one.

Tinian slid off Wrrl's back and slapped the field control back on. Then she dashed at them, too full of adrenaline to cower or even flinch this time.

While the troopers fired at Tinian, Wrrl sped past her on long, shaggy limbs. He reached them before she did and bodily flung them aside.

She'd never seen a Wookiee's full strength before. He terrified her.

Outside the service door, two energy-fenced conveyors connected the entry with I'att Armament's main receiving area. Wrrl howled encouragement at her.

Tinian leaped onto one conveyor and dashed toward the open spaces and freedom. Fabric flapped around her feet, dangling but giving her feet some protection. She grabbed a fistful of loose fabric above each knee and pulled up. That helped a little, but she couldn't bend her elbows far enough to do any real good.

She jumped off the conveyor onto gray duracrete. A three-meter wall surrounded the complex, surmounted by a catwalk with heavy gun emplacements. When Tinian glanced up, her heart sank. Five stormtroopers dashed along the top of the wall, three from the north and two from the west, converging on the corner ahead of her and Wrrl.

Then she remembered her good-luck piece. "Wait!" she cried. She dug down through layers of clothing and extricated a small hunk of chepatite impact explosive. She'd picked it up the first day Grandfather (her mind spasmed in pure, illogical grief: *Grandfather!*) had let her work a full shift. A silly souvenir and dangerous, maybe; but she couldn't fling it hard enough to set it off.

Wrrl could. "Take this," she exclaimed. "Throw it -- there." She pointed at the big corner gun. Two troopers aligned its sights on her and the Wookiee. "Then duck."

Wrrl bared his teeth, seized the explosive, and hurled it. Sweat trickled down Tinian's chest. She was roasting --

Dust, grit, and duracrete boulders blasted in all directions. A gap appeared beneath where the gun had been. Tinian sprinted toward it. Her shoulders and back flashed hot again. More troopers must have rushed in behind her.

The rubble pile was almost two meters high. Wrrl urged her to hurry.

Tinian yanked the bunched fabric and scrabbled upward. "How bad -- are -- you hurt?" she gasped. He growled defiance.

"Wrrl - you need - a medic - "

He tossed his head and kept running.

Tinian scrambled over the top. A laser blast whizzed off her right pauldron. That blast came from outside the wall! She flung herself backward into Wrrl's arms.

Wrrl yipped surprise. Had she singed him again?

He shoved her aside, grabbed a duracrete boulder, and heaved it down at the outside trooper. Then he woofed gently at Tinian, urging her out.

A blast from behind struck him. He howled. "Are you all right?" Tinian cried.

He gurgled and pointed outside the wall. "Not without you!"

Disregarding the armor field, he cuffed her with a huge paw. Tinian jumped down the rubble pile, spun around, and glanced up.

Wrrl stood framed by the gap. Another bolt caught him in his side. He screamed and turned full around, then lurched toward the stormtroopers inside the enormous guard wall.

Grief-stricken and stumbling with every other step, Tinian dashed across a weedy field that surrounded I'att Armament. This was a secure area, maintained in case of internal disaster ... and to enable guard wall staff to watch incoming traffic.

Why weren't they chasing her? Had Wrrl stopped all of them?

Wearing heat dissipation armor, she'd shine like a beacon to IR sensors. It would be easy to tag her with heavy weaponry. Moff Kerioth was probably calling over to Il Avali Spaceport right now.

How could she have been so wrong about the Empire? When had it changed?

At the weed field's edge, dilapidated duracrete buildings formed a toothy perimeter. Tinian slapped off the field projector and stumbled toward an abandoned warehouse. Its door hung askew. Two maybe-human derelicts scrambled deeper into shadows inside.

Tinian tried to imagine what they'd seen: the top half of an armless, unhelmeted stormtrooper? She pushed away from that warehouse and ran two more turns around bends in the alleys, but didn't find any better cover.

She shoved the flapping armor pieces up over her head, then shed the black glove like an old reptile skin. She was about to abandon it when a thought bigger than fear struck her: Moff Kerioth wanted this protection field badly enough to kill for it. She must use it to hurt Eisen Kerioth.

She dug her utility vibro-knife out of another jumpsuit pocket. Painstakingly she sliced vital components off the breastplate -- three electronic c-boards, controls, conduits -- then the carapace -- insulation, plus the projector itself.

Overhead movement snagged her peripheral vision. A silent repulsorcraft sped over the warehouse row.

Tinian shrank into the nearest building's shadow. She stuffed everything small into her pocket along with her vibro-knife. Then she bundled the rest of the vital parts together. Dashing barefoot around the next corner, she stepped on something sharp and almost fell into a rubbish heap ready for droid pickup.

That gave her another idea. Limping, she hurried back to the debris she'd left. She scooped shell fragments into the body glove and flung them behind the rubbish, safer from detection. Then she limped deeper into Il Avali's bad quarter.

Happy's Landing must be nearby. She and Daye had visited the alehouse several times, thinly disguised in working-class coveralls, looking for good music and flamingly spicy food. Luck and adrenaline got her there after only one wrong turn. She paused in the doorway, then plunged into its dark interior without giving her eyes time to adjust. It sounded nearly vacant. Late afternoon had never been Happy's busy hour.

She tripped over a bench. Nobody protested, so it must be vacant. She sank down, exhausted and ashamed. She had to get off Druckenwell, the only world she'd ever known.

But how? And ... alone? Daye would meet her here, if he could.

She swallowed on a parched throat. Mustn't use her credit account. She dug into a third jumpsuit pocket and found a few credit tokens worth a cold glass of Elba water. She dropped them onto the table.

Then she pillowed her sweaty forehead on her arms and tried to think. She couldn't've gotten this far unless Kerioth had sent most of his troopers chasing Daye. Therefore, Daye must be a prisoner. (Her mind writhed again: *Daye! Wrrl, oh, Wrrl!*)

On second thought, she'd worn the invaluable armor. They'd've all chased her. No, he'd codeveloped the anti-energy field. They needed Daye alive. Kerioth was undoubtedly tracking them both --

* * *

Daye Azur-Jamin flattened on the floor of a narrow service tunnel, scarcely breathing. During his first moments of flight, he'd been clipped by blaster fire halfway down his left thigh. It'd stopped throbbing several minutes ago. Now it simply felt dead.

Three pairs of white boots scurried past, outside the shaft's access panel. They'd find him sooner or later.

Daye dragged himself past the panel, deeper toward the center of I'att Armament.

Using his tiny comlink, he'd monitored Eisen Kerioth's command frequency. Poor Wrrl had paid off his life debt in full, and enabled Tinian to elude pursuit, but Kerioth -- who'd escaped his transparisteel cage by talking a trooper through code permutations -- had ordered repulsorcraft. They'd catch Tinian quickly unless he could divert them.

Daye's comlink also let him follow stormtrooper teams as they hunted him. Kerioth had ordered all personnel off factory grounds -- he meant to use IR scanning, and fewer warm footprints inside the factory would help.

It would be a race, then. I'att Armament's power grid lay under a force shield, open to the sky; the plant was built around it like a vast open square. In half an hour, Daye could crawl to the main power station. In two minutes more, he could backfeed the force shield into the power grid. That would take out the whole factory. Daye had hesitated to endanger innocent bystanders, but Kerioth was clearing bystanders away.

He probably wouldn't escape. But at least Eisen Kerioth wouldn't steal I'att Armament's anti-energy field -- Daye and Strephan's own brainchild -- and get away with it.

No one would ever know what Daye had done, either, except Tinian. She knew him too well.

The thought made him smile. He crawled on.

* * *

"Why, hello, Princess Tinian."

Momentarily terrified, Tinian flung herself upright. She breathed again when she saw two familiar people standing over her. Happy's Landing's current torch singer, Twilit Hearth, wore a scandalous, shimmering sapphire-blue gown. Twilit's mate, Sprig Cheever, sported a short, neat goatee and nondescript clothing. He set a glass of Elba water in front of her.

Tinian dashed tears away from her eyes and guzzled it.

Twilit touched her shoulder. "Hey. Hey, what's wrong?"

"I -- " Tinian gulped. She needed allies, and Daye -- deft reader of strangers' intentions -- had liked these two. (*Where was he?*) "I've got to hide. I'm in big trouble."

"Hey, it couldn't be that ba -- "

"Stormtroopers. They've shut down the factory."

"No," whispered Twilit. "Where's ... you know, your prince?"

"I don't know," Tinian groaned.

Twilit seized Tinian's elbow. "Come with me. There's no time to lose."

Twilit pulled her through a dark, cluttered hallway behind the kitchen, then up one flight of stairs to a cramped little dressing sleeping room.

"Twilit, thanks," Tinian objected, "but they'll search up here." She laid her valuables under an old boot rack, then startled. She'd sliced three c-boards off the control panel. Now she had only two.

"We'll hide you in plain sight." Twilit grabbed a shimmering red gown. "But we've got to move fast. Put this on."

She'd dropped one c-board! *Concentrate, Tinian. First you've got to survive.* Tinian eyed Twilit's curves, then glanced down her size-one jumpsuit. "Twilit, it won't -- "

"You've only got minutes," said the singer. "Are you going to walk into their gunsights wearing that uniform?"

Tinian skinned out of her jumpsuit and yanked up the extravagant gown. To her shock, padding slid into position over all the right places. The singer was no more voluptuous than Tinian, not in the flesh. She glanced into the room's only mirror. Her face and someone else's body looked out.

"Not bad," said the singer, "but we can do better." She spun a pair of shoes across the floor toward Tinian and rummaged in a tattered duffel. "I assume you can sing."

"Not like you." Tinian gratefully pulled on one shoe. Too big, but it would protect her throbbing foot.

"Most Imperials wouldn't know a song sparrow from a cloud crupa. You know all my songs, I've watched your lips move." Twilit opened a jar and smeared something onto Tinian's face. Tinian submitted to several layers of paint and a rapid, hair-pulling fluff job before Twilit announced, "Break's over, Princess. Get down there and show your stuff."

Tinian eyed the mirror again. Only the stranger looked out at her now. "Why are you doing this?" she asked. The stranger's lips moved when she spoke.

Twilit's face appeared beside the stranger's. Fire blazed in Twilit's blue eyes -- the same shade as her own, Tinian realized. "The Empire and I had a disagreement four or five systems ago," Twilit answered. "Now get down there."

"But you -- "

"I'm deathly ill. Couldn't sing another note for at least an hour. Go. Cheeve and Yccakic'll help."

Tinian tottered down the steps. Now that her eyes had adjusted, she could make out the alehouse's interior. Two human customers sat at one table, a lone Devaronian at the bar. On a clear, triangular stage raised above table level, Sprig Cheever crouched cracking his knuckles over the black, white, and green keys of a KeyBed that almost enclosed him. The other sentient band member, a Bith named Yccakic, plucked his Bottom Viol's five strings as he adjusted buttons along its tall upright neck. Redd Metalflake, the group's self-contained droid sound system, sat behind them audibly tweaking his circuitry.

"I'm ... singing?" Tinian croaked. "Twilit feels poorly."

Cheever grinned down through the stage at her. "That'll work."

Tinian climbed up to stand beside him. He played two chords she recognized, and she launched into "All I Can Ever Do" with all the guts she could muster. Now that she'd slowed down, she could only think of Daye. How could she sing, with Daye in terrible danger ... if he was alive?

Without warning, two stormtroopers sprang through Happy's front door. Tinian gulped. She covered the beat she'd missed by adlibbing a lyric. One trooper glanced at her. Immediately he swiveled away. She felt relieved ... and hurt, too. Was she that unattractive in real life?

The troopers bustled from table to table. Just as they vanished into the kitchens, a seismic rumble rocked the alehouse. Patrons slid under tables. Tinian flailed, trying to grab something, and connected with Yccakic's arm. "Off the stage!" Cheever commanded. Yccakic laid down his Viol and towed her down clear, narrow stairs, then out into the dusk-darkening street.

Three gargantuan fireballs lit the northern sky, rising under low clouds precisely where I'att Armament had stood.

Both stormtroopers dashed out of Happy's Landing. Passing without a backward glance, they sprinted up the street. A customer who'd followed Yccakic outdoors saluted the fireballs with a raised fist. "Down the rich!" he hooted. "Down the Empire! Up anarchy!"

"Hey," burbled Yccakic. "You okay, kid?"

Tinian's ears sang. Her vision blacked out from the edges inward.

She collapsed in a heap.

* * *

A beefy stranger stumbled into Happy's Landing near dawn. Tinian, still masquerading as Twilit, drooped on a bench close to Cheever. The stranger demanded a TrooperBreath, downed the chartreuse glassful, then looked around for company. Spotting Tinian and Cheever, he wobbled over. "That oughta help. I've been hunting and lifting all night," he declared.

"What's up?" Cheever set a hand casually on Tinian's shoulder.

"I just spent four hours slaving for the Empire. The head trooper rounded up all the muscle he could find out on the streets."

"What for?"

"He had us searching I'att Armament... or the crater that usedta be I'att Armament ... for survivors."

The alehouse spun around Tinian.

"Find any?" Cheever squeezed her shoulder.

The bulky newcomer shook his head. "The Big Moff's speeder was the smallest wreckage we could identify. Other than that, nothing. Totality. Looked like an inside job to me." He burped, then grinned toothily. "Some brave, suicidal lunatic musta wanted to take it away from the Empire pretty badly." He raised a glass in wordless tribute. Tinian stared. Daye, gone? All that promise ... *broken?*

Not only Daye, but Grandfather, Grandmother, and Wrrl. All her life.

She lost track of time after that. Some hours later, the band held council upstairs over the kitchens. "Time to leave Druckenwell." Cheever draped his long legs over a packing crate. "This place is too hot for me."

"Me, too," put in Twilit.

"We'll never get away," lamented a metallic monotone. Cheever had lugged Redd Metalflake upstairs and set the boxy sound droid on a stretch of floor. "Everyone picks on musicians."

Twilit folded her arms. "We'll go," she said firmly. "The last time we ignored Cheever, we nearly lost our instruments in an apartment fire. Is somebody onto us, Cheeve?"

"Not yet."

Tinian barely listened. She was in shock. *Nothing will ever touch me again. Nothing. No one. Ever.*

Yccakic flicked a series of folds around his tiny mouth. "Has anyone looked up outside? We've got a blanket of repulsorcraft sitting over Il Avali. Security will be double; at customs, triple. And we promised Tinian -- "

"We'll make it," Cheever predicted.

Twilit cleared her throat. "Fix my ID for her. I'll lie low here for a few days."

Cheever raised an eyebrow.

Twilit shrugged. "If Comus can make my ID cover Tinian; he can run me a dupe, easy. I'll be okay."

Cheever stroked his short beard. "That'll work. But Princess, about that ... luggage of yours. I don't think we can risk taking it out through Imperial Customs."

That cracked Tinian's introspection. Even with a c-board missing, those pieces might help someone recreate the anti-energy field. "Wait," she begged. "The customs people will have no idea what your instruments are supposed to look like ... right?"

Twilit shrugged. "They're musical morons," she agreed. "What are you driving at?"

"It's already in pieces," Tinian answered. "Attach them to your instruments."

Cheever stroked his goatee. "Ye-es," he drawled. "I can fit most of it to look like it's part of the KeyBed's insides."

"I'm good for a c-board or two," proclaimed Redd. A touch of reverb added confidence to his voice.

Tinian wondered if she were going crazy. She didn't care if she lived or died, but she must get that field transmitter out through customs. "Couldn't you get it off Druckenwell safer without me? If they catch me trying to pass Twilit's ID, it's the spice mines for all of us.

Affectionately, Twilit mussed Tinian's hair. "We know good people offworld," she said. "People who can use that stuff against the Empire. They'll want to talk to the I'att Princess. Guaranteed."

* * *

A door slammed. "She was there, all right," declared Woyiq. Daye shuddered. The huge, beefy man's voice jabbed daggers through his injured head.

The other human -- or was he a Gotal? Daye's eyes wouldn't focus -- turned to shush Woyiq. "Hey, keep it down!"

"Sorry." Woyiq slunk toward Daye's bedside. "Sorry." The huge human had dragged Daye out from between jagged duracrete slabs, laboring in near-total darkness at the bottom of Il Avali's deep new crater. "Really, I'm sorry --"

Daye squeezed his attendant's hand. "Did you -- "

"Wait," said the ... yes, with horns like those it had to be a Gotal. "Get over here, you big battlewagon."

Woyiq shuffled even closer.

"You found her?" Daye whispered. "She's all right?"

The beefy man laid a hand on Daye's synthflesh-bandaged shoulder. Both of his legs had been crushed, too, and one hand ... and they didn't dare carry him out to a medic. "She was at Happy's Landing, hanging out with the band. You guessed it right."

Daye swallowed. Even that small movement hurt. "Did you -- "

"I told her we found no survivors. She -- "

"Thanks. Thanks, both of you." Daye shut his eyes. He couldn't bear to hear how Tinian had taken the news of his alleged death, not yet. He half wished he

could dissolve his body into nothingness and turn Woyiq's fatal pronouncement into fact.

But evidently the universe had spared him ... most of him ... for a while. He couldn't drag Tinian into the furtive existence he meant to lead now. Woyiq and his Gotal accomplice promised to sponsor him straight to the Rebellion as soon as Il Avali calmed down. The Rebellion needed his talents. They might be able to fix him up, too... somewhat.

In the meantime, he had decided it had to be kinder to let Tinian think him dead. She'd leave Druckenwell. Witty and capable, she'd make a new life.

He would never love anyone else, though. "Good-bye, Tinian," he murmured toward the wall. "May the Force be with you."

* * *

Customs bustled, quadruple anything Tinian had ever seen -- but they passed, just as Cheever predicted. Tinian followed him up a stale passageway into the transport's fourth-class hold. They found seats close to Yccakic's. Redd rode in the cargo hold, guarding the doctored instruments.

Tinian slumped down, glad this hold had no viewport. No last glimpse of Druckenwell would linger in her memory.

Alone in the galaxy except for two virtual strangers and an armload of illicit electronics, she'd find some way to help bring down the New Order. Every time she hurt Palpatine's Empire just a little bit, she'd dedicate that small victory to the memory of Daye Azur-Jamin and the life they could have had.

Force be with you, love. Leaning back, Tinian squeezed tears out of her eyes and braced for takeoff.

Battlefront: Sabotage At Rhen Var

The Galactic Empire had long operated a listening outpost out of a derelict citadel on Rhen Var, an ice-covered Outer Rim world deeply entrenched in history surrounding the Galactic Republic. Early in the Galactic Civil War the outpost was able to monitor Rebel fleet activity. The Rebel Alliance

subsequently launched an assault to prevent the outpost from tracking them. The Rebels captured the facility from the Imperial garrison stationed there and maintained control over it for a few days before the Empire launched a counterattack.

"Our long-standing listening outpost on the high peaks of Rhen Var is under Rebel attack. This outpost is key to monitoring the local systems for Rebel activity. Defend the monitoring station from the Rebel attack."

—Emperor Palpatine briefs the player before the mission

The Imperial attack force—consisting of snowtroopers, Imperial Army pilots, and Phase Zero dark troopers—arrived and was ordered to seize the section of the outpost called the Keep. The Imperials advanced against the Rebels, who had deployed at a tower below the station. The Rebel force was comprised of troopers, vanguard division soldiers, snipers, Wookiee smugglers, and pilots.

The Imperial counterattack overran the Alliance forces, with the strike ultimately ending in the destruction of the outpost and the loss of all Rebel forces.

By the end of the battle, all civilized presence on the planet had been wiped out.

"Welcome to your new post, ladies and gentlemen: Outpost DVL-181. We call it 'The Quagmire.' DVL-181 is a good base, people—but it does take some getting used to. The Quagmire's facilities are complete and are well-defended, and we're far enough out that you don't have to live in constant fear of Imperial attack. You'll be more worried about pulling a slime-bug out of your dinner or a

marsh-slither out of your landing gear than a stormtrooper assault.

"But remember one thing: slime-bugs don't kill. Stormtroopers do. Don't let this place coax you into dropping your guard. Anyone caught slacking off will end up on marsh-slither detail for the duration of their tour.

"Dismissed."

—Standard welcoming speech of Sergeant Dek Laffer, (Staff Sergeant/Rebel Outpost DVL-181).

A LONG TIME AGO,
IN A GALAXY FAR,
FAR AWAY...

FRANKCHOW

FRANKCHOW

DOWN-ON-THEIR-LUCK SMUGGLERS
HAN SOLO AND CHEWBACCA ARE
LYING LOW AT THE FAR REACHES OF
THE OUTER RIM, HOPING TO STAY
OUT OF TROUBLE BY RUNNING
EASY CARGO JOBS.

UNFORTUNATELY,
TROUBLE HAS A
HABIT OF TRACKING
THEM DOWN...

WRAARG!

NO, I DON'T
KNOW WHO THEY ARE, BUT
THEY'RE SHOOTING AT US SO
I GUESS THEY KNOW WHO WE ARE!



LET'S NOT
HANG AROUND
LONG ENOUGH
TO FIND OUT.

PUNCH IT.

HRRRRRRFF

THE CORELLIAN KID

BUT AS THE
MILLENNIUM FALCON
JUMPS TO LIGHTSPEED, A
LASER BOLT FINDS ITS MARK...

SHOOOON!!!

WHOAH!

THE
HYPERDRIVE
REGULATOR'S
BEEN HIT.

WE'RE
DROPPING OUT OF
LIGHTSPEED...

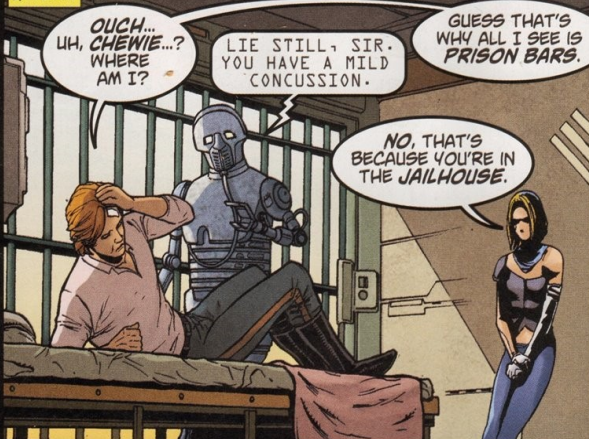
WOOP!
WOOP!
WOOP!

HANG ON
CHEWIE, THIS IS
GONNA GET
ROUGH!

WRITER CHRIS COOPER ARTIST ANDRES PONCE COLOURS DIGIKORE LETTERER DAVID LEACH



LATER...





WHY DO I GET THE FEELING MY DAY'S ABOUT TO GET A WHOLE LOT WORSE?



YOU'RE SMUGGLERS, RIGHT?

I MEAN, YOUR SHIP IS WELL ARMED, AND YOU'RE SOME PILOT.

SO YOU MUST KNOW THE HUTTS.

HUTTS? YEAH, WE KNOW 'EM. WHY?

WE'VE GOT OURSELVES A HUTT PROBLEM.



TWO LOW-LIFES CALLED BO-DUM AND RARSK ACTING LIKE THEY OWN THE PLANET.

WE NEED HELP TO GET RID OF THEM.

PROFESSIONAL HELP.

LISTEN, SISTER, WE'VE GOT ENOUGH PROBLEMS WITH ONE HUTT ALREADY, LET ALONE...

WAIT A MINUTE.

I GOT AN IDEA. WHERE'S CHEWIE?

MEANWHILE, IN A HIDDEN FORTRESS KILOMETERS AWAY.



READING A TRAIL OF HULL DEBRIS AND HYPERDRIVE FUEL IN THE UPPER ATMOSPHERE.

MUST BE THAT SHIP OUR PIRATE DRONES BLASTED.

IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE ANY DECENT SALVAGE FELL ON THIS ROCK.

WHERE DID IT COME DOWN?

NEAR THE CORELLIAN SETTLEMENT, IN SECTOR FIFTEEN.

EXCELLENT. AN OPPORTUNITY TO TURN A PROFIT AND REACQUAINT MYSELF WITH THE SHERIFF'S BOUNTIFUL DAUGHTER. PREPARE THE SPEEDERS.

Continued on page 22

NEXT DAY, THE VILE HUTTS AND THEIR SCAVENGER CREW ROLL INTO TOWN, BUT **SOMEONE** IS WAITING...

WHAT IS THIS?
A WELCOMING COMMITTEE?

JENNA. YOU BECOME MORE INCANDESCENT EVERY TIME WE MEET.

I WAS SO SORRY TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR FATHER.

SORRY? IT WAS ONE OF YOUR THUGS THAT KILLED HIM.

TRUE ENOUGH. I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BRING US CLOSER TOGETHER.

GGWWARRR!

WHAT THE...?!

OH, DIDN'T YOU THINK WE'D FIND ANOTHER LAWMAN TO PROTECT US?

YOU'D BETTER WATCH YOUR STEP, 'CAUSE...

...EVERYONE KNOWS IT ISN'T WISE TO UPSET A WOOKIEE SHERIFF!

RATTLED BY THE NEW LAW IN TOWN, THE HUTTS RETREAT TO THE LOCAL CANTINA.



WHOEVER HEARD OF A WOOKIEE LAWMAN?

NEXT THING IT'LL BE GUNDARKS ON THE IMPERIAL SENATE!

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO NOW?

IF WE DON'T MAKE SOME REAL MONEY SOON, WE'LL NEVER BUY OUR WAY BACK INTO THE CARTEL.

DID I HEAR SOMEONE'S LOOKING TO MAKE SOME CREDITS?

I KNOW WHERE THERE'S A WHOLE PILE OF CASH, JUST WAITING TO BE DUG OUT OF THE DESERT.

LEAVE YOUR FILTHY ORTOLAN TRUNK OUT OF OUR BUSINESS, SCUM.

WHATEVER YOU SAY.

YOU MEAN THE SHIP WE SHOT DOWN WAS THE MILLENNIUM FALCON?!

SOLO...?!

GUESS I'LL JUST COLLECT JABBA'S BOUNTY ON HAN SOLO ALL BY MYSELF...

PEOPLE HEREABOUTS CALL ME THE CORELLIAN KID.

BEST TRACKER IN THE SYSTEM --

AND I KNOW WHERE THAT SHIP CAME DOWN.

ONLY I AIN'T GOT THE KIND OF SALVAGE EQUIPMENT YOU GENTS ARE PACKING...

THEN PERHAPS WE CAN DO BUSINESS AFTER ALL.

WHAT SAY WE SPLIT THE BOUNTY, 60/40?

CALL IT A FINDER'S FEE.

AND THEN WE'LL SPLIT HIM 60/40.

HO HO HO.

BY DAWN, THE SCAVENGERS ARE DEEP IN THE RED DUNES...

WE'RE
GETTING CLOSE TO
THE CRASH ZONE.

STAY SHARP,
THE DUNES SWALLOW
THINGS UP REAL
FAST.

I DON'T SEE
ANYTHING... WAIT.
THERE ARE SPEEDERS
DOWN THERE.

IT'S THAT
NEW WOOKIEE
LAWMAN! HE BEAT
US TO IT.

BUT HOW
DID HE KNOW
WHERE TO
LOOK?

UNLESS...

TOO LATE, THE HUTTS REALISE
THEY'VE BEEN LED INTO A TRAP.

WE'RE
SURROUNDED!

THEY
WERE WAITING
FOR US!

OPEN FIRE!

WHY YOU
DOUBLE-
CROSSING...

GET BACK
HERE, YOU RULOOSIAN
SAND-SNAKE!

ZAP-ZAP-ZAP-ZAP!

AAIEEEE!

AS THE SMOKE OF BATTLE CLEARS, THE HUTTS EMERGE.



IS IT OVER?

THE SPEEDERS... ALL OUR EQUIPMENT, BLASTED TO OBLIVION... WE ARE RUINED!

SUDDENLY ENGINES ROAR AND...



SOLO'S SHIP! BUT IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE A WRECK.



SHE'S BEEN CALLED A LOT WORSE.

WHO THE...?!

THE CORELLIAN KID AT YOUR SERVICE, BUT YOU CAN CALL ME SOLO.

HAN SOLO.



YOU WON'T GET AWAY WITH THIS SOLO.

I'LL PUT A PRICE ON YOUR HEAD SO HIGH,

EVEN THE MIGHTY JABBA WILL TURN BOUNTY HUNTER!

I DON'T THINK SO, BO-DUM. YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE THE MEANS TO STEAL FROM US ANYMORE.



BETTER GET A WRIGGLE ON, BOYS.

IT'S A LONG HAUL BACK TO CIVILISATION.

NOOOOOOOOO!!

THE END

L

Life in a Jawa Sandcrawler

I am QT-3PO, protocol Droid. I have been asked to relate what I know of those disgusting creatures: the Jawas. I had the singular misfortune to be a guest of them when my master's freighter landed for repairs at Mos Eisley. I wandered off to examine the local scenery when several Jawas forcibly requested my presence aboard their "sandcrawler." I graciously accepted their invitation, acutely conscious of their vicious-looking blasters.

The Jawa vehicle reminded me of a Silurian rodents' nest, riddled with hidden entry tubes, access hatches, and ladders. I observed the creatures scurrying about in a particularly disgusting manner, storing poor Droids for some horrible fate. It soon became apparent that they make their home within the dark, cramped interior of the massive land vehicles. (Between you and me, they are completely oblivious to such social graces as bathing or cleaning their garments.)

The sandcrawler I visited was an amazing — albeit terrifying — technical achievement. It was a self-propelled, treaded, multistoried surface vehicle that appeared to serve as repository for the Jawas and their salvaged materials. I assume that each crawler is a separate community; the one I viewed sheltered over 300 occupants. No one knows if they acquire their sandcrawlers in the usual Jawa fashion or if present-day Jawas are remnants of an advanced race (which I for one doubt completely). Regardless, they kept the vehicle patched, repaired, and in working order, despite their quite uncivilized and foul-mannered treatment of guests.

I saw little evidence of organized government and almost no familiar social practices. The traits they exhibit in public are only a slight indication of the unpleasant behavior I saw within the sandcrawler. The cluttered bays were full of spare parts, cannibalized machines, and misshapen Droids of all sizes, shapes, and functions. These poor Droids told me tales that made my servomotors overheat! A worn R4 unit explained to me that after the Jawas satisfy their obsessive curiosity, the machines are either sold or broken up for use in some strange, hybrid Jawa invention. I was sure that such a fate awaited me. But my master finally found and freed me, prudently paying what the Jawas asked.

In all, the experience was not a pleasant one, and if I never meet another of those shameless creatures it will be too soon.

Lethal Alliance

A few months before the Battle of Yavin, Rianna Saren, a Twi'lek, started her life of freedom as a mercenary. Rianna had an arrogant streak due to her painful past as a slave. Rianna lost a lekku after Zarien Kheev, the Zabrak slaver

who owned her, got angry at her for trying to escape and had her lekku cut off. Rianna eventually had a prosthetic replacement fitted. Rianna started off her mercenary career on Coruscant, but she often had to flee from Imperial scout groups. She eventually was contacted by Kyle Katarn, who asked her to steal an Imperial shipment of Mirkanite from a Black Sun warehouse. She decided to do it, for a price.

She infiltrated the innermost area of the warehouse, killed many Black Sun guards, but was captured and accidentally activated Zeeo. Zeeo freed her from her cell and they attained possession of the Imperial shipment and brought it to the Rebellion. Leia Organa was very grateful and asked Rianna if she would go to Alderaan. Rianna agreed and successfully shut down an Imperial drug chain. On Alderaan she confronted and killed Slak Sagar, then took his heavy blaster. While on Alderaan she learned from Princess Leia that shipments of the drug were on Mustafar where it was being used to increase the slave production of Mirkanite. Rianna set out to stop production at the factory.

She infiltrated the factory and found some Wookiee slaves. The leader of the group said where the drill is in the factory. She deactivated the drill shaft and set off explosives to destroy the entire facility. She then came across Kheev and followed him to Tatooine, where her ship was shot down by Boba Fett in the *Slave I*. While on Tatooine she located and killed the Twi'lek slaver Sedriss after finding out where Kheev was located and then took his Blaster Rifle. He was in another part of the town and when she found him in an arena he let a Rancor loose. Rianna, Saren and Zeeo killed the Rancor. Kheev then captured her and took her to Despayre, where she found out about the Death Star.

Rianna escaped the prison on Despayre and managed to make her way onto the Death Star before Despayre's destruction. Upon arrival on the Death Star she headed to the Communication center and told the Rebels about the battlestation. She then stole an Imperial ship and headed to Danuta, where the plans of the Death Star were being held by Kheev. Rianna fought her way to Kheev and killed him in his personal battle armor, though not before Kheev was able to take a pot shot at Rianna. Zeeo sacrificially took the shot and was seriously damaged. Rianna took the Death Star plans from Kheev's body.

Rianna holding Zeeo, walked to her transport ready to continue her mercenary work.

Dark Forces

"The research complex where the Death Star was designed is located on Danuta. We want you to go there, find your way into the facility, and retrieve those plans."

—Mon Mothma to Kyle Katarn

The Mission to Danuta was an early operation of the Galactic Civil War and the second phase of Operation Skyhook. After Rianna Saren informed the Rebellion about the Destruction of Despayre and the plans of the Death Star being held on Danuta, it was decided to steal those schematics in order to find a weakness to the new Imperial weapon. Rebel leadership decided that sending a team of commandos to fulfill the mission would risk too much collateral damage to the city of Trid, so they instead hired Saren and Kyle Katarn to infiltrate the facility and steal the plans. Katarn and Saren worked separately, having no contact with each other throughout the mission.

"I'm dropped outside the monolithic Imperial base. Getting here was the easy part, it seems. Somewhere inside is the only thing that can save the Rebel Alliance from total annihilation. And the only obstacle between me and heroic success is a battalion or so of Imperial stormtroopers, commandos, and officers—and the fact that I have no idea where to look. Time is also running out. Kyle be nimble, Kyle be quick..."

—Kyle Katarn

When a librarian Atour Riten found the Death Star plans in the Death Star Library, he secretly sent a copy to the Imperial station on Danuta.

"This is too easy."

—Kyle Katarn

Kyle Katarn, a former Imperial-turned Rebel agent, was sent into an Imperial facility to take a supplemental set of the Death Star plans. He infiltrated the complex with the assistance of Meck Odom, an Imperial officer and longtime friend who gave Katarn information on when to pass through the south perimeter gate, how to enter through an air shaft, and what kind of security to expect inside the facility. Odom was further able to override the south perimeter gate's collateral security systems, which were his duty to watch.

Simultaneously, Jan Ors secured an escape route with the *Moldy Crow* by destroying the Imperial TIE Fighters at Trid's spaceport; all but one were destroyed on the ground. Guaranteed that no fighters would pursue them, Ors then staged a diversion at the Trid facility by detonating a small bomb near the north perimeter, forty-five minutes after Katarn was to enter the base, and then flying by in the *Crow* fifteen minutes later to fire upon any personnel who were sent to investigate. It was during this run that she destroyed the base's AT-ST and killed Major Horst, the facility's officer-of-the-day, who had decided to investigate the perimeter disturbance personally.

During this diversion, Katarn cut through the station's reduced defenses. Despite his skill and adrenaline, Katarn was on a few occasions saved by luck, and in the most intense moments of fighting he found himself beginning to draw on the Force to sense things before seeing them—a reliance he did not yet fully understand. However, despite lower resistance, the facility was still heavily fortified with various security systems. To this end, Katarn needed a red banded key to access a lift, leading to a security room. The security room contained a control panel which opened the staircase leading into the control room. Aiming to preserve his accomplice's anonymity, Katarn wounded Odom with a careful shot that incapacitated without killing him. After retrieving the memory matrix, Katarn then met Ors and the *Moldy Crow* at the rendezvous point on the roof, escaping with the plans that ensured the obtainment of a complete layout of the Death Star.

Force Commander

During an uprising on the planet Kalaan, Imperial Cattena Squad (including honorary troopers Brenn and Dellis Tantor) is struck a major blow by the deaths of its ranking officers. Brenn, though, is able to take command and win the day. As a result, Brenn is promoted to Lieutenant under a new commanding officer, General Malcor Brashin, who sends him to train with Captain Beri Tulon on Tatooine. On Tatooine, Brenn and Dellis are placed with Zeta Squad, Captain Terrik's command . . .

35:3:3/GNS/923E/RAL.3.GRA/MIL

Ralltiir Uprising Quelled

Grallia Spaceport, Ralltiir

Imperial forces commanded by Lord Tion moved to suppress Rebel terrorist activities on Ralltiir early this week. Tion evoked emergency powers with the Emperor's blessing, effectively sealing the entire system as the Imperial task force moved in to seize strategic assets and restore stability and peace to the embattled planet.

Imperial intervention came after a month-long investigation revealed that Rebel revolutionaries had infiltrated the Ralltiir High Council, intent on sowing discord and unrest among the populace. The entire High Council has been disbanded, and its members are being detained under charges of treason.

An Imperial spokesman for Lord Tion stated at a press conference that due to the wide-spread Rebel underground on Ralltiir, the Imperial blockade is expected to continue for some time, as officials move to identify and eradicate Rebel Alliance resistance fighters and sympathizers.

For the safety of the citizens, all travel privileges offplanet have been revoked, and onplanet travel is restricted.

Numerous disaster relief organizations have been denied access to the system, and emergency powers statutes have permitted Lord Tion to rebuff several attempts by elements in the Imperial Senate to launch independent investigations.

Those traveling along the Perlemian Trade Route in the Darpa Sector are advised that the entire Ralltiir system is off limits until further notice.

Galaxy News Service

The Farlander Papers

"Princess? What princess!" I asked.

"Princess Leia," Hamo told me. "She's one of the Senators from the Old Republic, originally from Alderaan. We're supposed to escort her while they hand-deliver something important to her. I get the impression our covert listening operation was a success."

It had been a few days since the Intrepid missions, and most of us had been off-duty to rest up. Naeco and I had looked in on Jan-lo, and she was beginning to seem like her old self remarkably fast.

Even after nearly buying it at the wrong end of a missile, she wanted only to get back in the cockpit. I had a feeling she might be grounded, though: It was tough taking all the damage she had suffered. Maybe she could enter Intelligence training now, the way we had always figured she would.

Later, as Hamo and I walked down one of the endless corridors inside the Calamarian cruiser, he was filling me in on the scuttlebutt about the upcoming mission. We often knew a great deal about what was going on before we were briefed. The veteran pilots had a good network of information - particularly Hamo, now that he was a commander and all.

"I guess I've never met a princess before," I said, kind of intrigued by the idea.

Hamo just shrugged and grinned. "Who has!"

"Think we'll get to see her!" I asked, feeling a little starstruck, a little stupid.

"Nah. We'll just pull escort duty and then hyper back here. She's not going to waste any time."

Something made me ask, "Hey, Hamo... You know her or something!"

Hamo blushed. Yes, he actually blushed.

"I met her," he admitted.

"So what's she like!" I asked, giving him a good-natured prod in the ribs.

"A looker," he confided, and immediately acted guilty for divulging that much. He clammed up then, and I could get no more out of him on the subject.

OP 11: Deliver Plans to Princess Leia

I quickly went through my standard mission-start procedure, and then initiated my search for the Tantive IV, targeting the nearest of the corvettes and heading toward it. After identifying CRVs T-Force 2 and 3, I found Princess

Leia's ship, and the shuttle Maria dropped out of hyperspace right on cue. I assigned both to memory locations, and took up a patrol of the immediate area.

About the time I got to thinking that everything was too quiet, an Imperial Star Destroyer arrived. It launched two four-ship groups of Assault Gunboats (Mu and Tau) and then departed.

I set my cannons to quad-fire, and then switched to torpedoes in dual-fire mode. I targeted the nearest of the Gunboats, Mu 2, and took off after it. I fired as soon as I had a solid lock, and then I turned to go after the rest of Mu squadron. Mu 1 and Mu 3 gave me no trouble: I hit them with two torpedoes each, and they fragged.

Mu 4 had split off, and I saw that it was attempting to disable the Tantive IV while GUN Tau was firing missiles and engaging X-W Gold and myself.

The Maria made it to safety as I was destroying Mu 4. I was hit a couple of times by missiles, but was able to redirect power to the shields before taking any real damage. X-W Gold 1 wasn't so lucky, and succumbed to missile fire.

The Tantive IV hyperspaced to safety as I was taking out GUN Tau. With Princess Leia and the Death Star plans on their way to High Command, I turned about and headed home.

An hour later, we were back in the cockpits of our fighters. All we knew was that the princess was under attack. We weren't about to let anything happen to her.

OP 12: Protect Princess Leia

We hypered in, Hamo and I in a pair of A-wings, went through the standard mission-start sequence, and then headed toward the nearest group of TIE Interceptors, Alpha.

I noticed several TIE Bombers also headed in our direction, so I decided to leave the Interceptors to X-W Gold. The Bombers were in two groups, one of

three ships (Gamma) and one of four ships (Delta). I targeted the nearest Bomber and moved to intercept.

As I closed on my target, I found that three of the Interceptors were on my tail. I didn't even have to ask Red 1 to help out, though: He was right behind them, giving them serious second thoughts about their reckless pursuit. Beta 2, the most persistent, got himself killed while he was closing in on me. Thanks to Red 1, I had enough time to lock and launch a missile at the nearest Bomber, Gamma 1.

It was about this time that a group of three Assault Gunboats entered the area, but I decided to finish off the Bombers before dealing with that threat.

I brought my ship around and came in behind the remaining Bombers, cutting my speed to avoid overtaking them. I carefully locked on each in turn, and fired one missile. When all but two were eliminated, the survivors began to evade, so I switched back to cannons and finished them off with lasers. I had kept one missile for an emergency.

Now I targeted the nearest Gunboat, and proceeded to engage it with cannons. After that, the nearest enemy starfighter was T/I Alpha 1, which, along with two Gunboats, was dogfighting X-W Gold in the vicinity of the Tantive IV. I immediately went to join them.

The Star Destroyer had launched replacement waves for Gamma and Delta, but they wouldn't get here for a while. On the way towards Tantive IV, I noticed that Gold 2 had hull damage, so I pulled rank and ordered him to head home. Princess Leia's ship finally hypered out, and, after finishing off the remaining enemy ships in the area, Gold 1 and I followed in its tracks.

After the mission is complete and the pilots begin to celebrate, they receive word that the Star Destroyer Immortal had ambushed the Tantive IV upon reversion to realspace. They fear the worst, but the Tantive IV was able to make it into hyperspace again, heading for Tatooine.

As morale drops due to not knowing the fate of Leia or the Death Star plans, everyone is informed of the Death Star's existence. They hope to somehow delay its eventual completion by carrying out raids against the Empire that

might slow construction if it is still being built, and they need to know where it is located.

To this end, shortly after Jan-lo recovers (and is assigned to Intelligence for a new mission), the Rebels on the Independence, with help from arms brought by the trader Tuz, begin striking new Imperial targets. After a few general targets, Breth Gart earns his wings and is assigned to Keyan. They capture a few members of the Death Star design team to slow things down.

As this and other missions are happening, Keyan is still plagued by strange dreams and is slowly being given hints as to how to use the Force, particular the Jedi mind trick, within the dreams. He uses it a couple of times to get duties that he wants, intending on using the Force, if he can learn to control it, to be a better pilot, although his actions lean toward the Dark Side in terms of bending someone else's will. Luckily, the Light Side remains dominant over him, simply enhancing his piloting skills.

AN IMPERIAL ADVERTORIAL

LORD VADER-- WELCOME ABOARD!

WE HAVE NO TIME FOR PLEASANTRIES, COMMANDER. THE REBELS HAVE STOLEN THE DEATH STAR PLANS. THEY MUST BE STOPPED.

BUT LORD VADER-- WITHOUT THE PLANS WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO OPERATE THE BATTLE STATION. ER... WE'RE AS GOOD AS POWERLESS.

THIS CONTAINS A FULL LIST OF THE BATTLE STATION'S FUNCTIONS, COMMANDER. NOW, LET US CRUSH THE REBELLION.

HMM...

THAT LOOKS VULNERABLE...

EVEN THE EMPIRE NEEDS A LITTLE HELP SOMETIMES! GET YOUR DEATH STAR MANUAL FROM HAYNES.CO.UK/DEATHSTAR OR ANY GOOD BOOKSTORE!

Haynes

SCRIPT JONATHAN WILKINS ART & COLORS JEFF CARLISLE LETTERS JON CHAPPLE

Battlefront: Death Star- Prison Break

"Way I heard it, nine guys broke out, one of them Jedi."

—Anonymous Imperial CPO to Tenn Graneet

"Once it was finally finished the Death Star was the Emperor's favorite toy and it was also the most boring assignment in the galaxy for a stormtrooper. Tedious inspection drills, endless hours of guarding impregnable force field generators..."

—Anonymous 501st stormtrooper

During the later stages of the Death Star's construction, captured Imperial enemies from all across the galaxy were quietly sent to the top-secret space station for interrogation and imprisonment. A group of captives of the organized Rebel movement became acquainted with an unidentified Human Jedi who was also confined to Block 2180. He had devised a simple plan to escape from the Imperial battle station that could be initiated with the co-operation of the other inmates.

"...things got so bad that when a prison break erupted in the cell block, we were almost happy to have someone shooting at us again. If only we had known what an embarrassing snipestorm we were about to wade into. We probably would have jettisoned the whole detention block into space."

—Anonymous 501st stormtrooper

The Empire was probably not alerted of the stealthy prison-break until after the rioters had raided an Imperial arsenal, arming themselves against expected stormtrooper counterattacks.

The first stormtroopers to become aware of the riot were those in Hangar 84G who met up with the elite 501st Legion troopers—coincidentally aboard the Death Star for an exterior inspection—that assembled in the hangar and drove off the Rebels through two blast doors that they poured in through. Most prisoners could not be recaptured without a fight and so were shot down in the unanticipated bloodshed. Hangar 84-G was at last secured and locked-down by the Empire after a few minutes of assault and the Rebels instead moved on toward the Fire Control Room where the superlaser was located.

Meanwhile, stormtroopers rushed across walkways toward the superlaser, blasting a Rebel who had stolen the Death Star's schematics. Unfortunately for the Empire, the bridge normally spanning a reactor tunnel, which led to Hangar 84-G on one side and the Fire Control Room on the other, had been taken down earlier. The stormtroopers instead had to use the alternate (and much longer) route through the prison area. In the meantime, other Rebels had managed to arrive at Hangar 85G, just beyond the Fire Control Room, capturing it long enough to beam a separate, partial set of the schematics to a Rebel base on Polis Massa. The other sets would be stolen at Danuta and Toprawa.

All the rioters in the Fire Control Room were blasted and the Imperial troopers moved onward to Hangar 85-G before the Rebels could completely board and hijack a *Sentinel*-class landing craft as an escape shuttle. With not more than two minutes before take-off, stormtroopers burst into the hangar eliminating as many escapees as they could. Their Jedi leader at last exposed himself in a desperate sprint toward the shuttle, but a moment later, Imperial shock troopers had blown it up.

The frenzied Jedi ignited his lightsaber and cut through any trooper that stepped into his path. The Jedi and his squad of troopers were eventually gunned down. Imperial intelligence later tracked the missing schematics to Polis Massa, where an even more fiery skirmish would eventually break out.

"After the embarrassment of the prison break, Lord Vader removed us from our comfortable billet, and began dragging the 501st across the galaxy, in a dangerous hunt for the now missing Death Star plans. Ironically, our punishment eventually proved to be our salvation; the poor souls who took our place in the detention area, were completely wiped out when the Death Star was destroyed."

—Anonymous 501st stormtrooper^[src]

The prison break was a great embarrassment to Darth Vader's supposedly "Elite" 501st Legion, and thus an embarrassment to Vader himself. As punishment, Vader had the Legion reassigned, from their "comfortable" position on the Death Star, to his army, helping him search the galaxy for the stolen Death Star plans.

X-Wing: The Gathering Storm

After learning that the Empire was building the Death Star, a battlestation capable of destroying a planet, the Alliance attempted to discover which contractors were involved in its construction.

As part of this operation the Mon Calamari privateer Tuz helped to capture the *Sidral II* while it transported a cargo of military hardware, including timers and fusion cells. The Alliance dispatched the CR90 corvette *Frazier* to rendezvous with the freighter and transfer its cargo. The operation was interrupted by the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer *Immortal*, but the Rebel forces were able to complete the transfer before escaping to hyperspace.

Part of the stolen shipment had passed through an Imperial repair dock near Coruscant, the Imperial capital. Alliance High Command decided to launch an attack on the facility in the hopes of crippling the infrastructure that was servicing ships working on the Death Star.

Part of the shipment of military equipment captured in the last operation passed through a repair facility near Coruscant. Alliance High Command decided to launch an attack on the facility in the hopes of crippling the infrastructure that was servicing ships working on the Death Star.

Despite the presence of many Imperial forces, a Rebel Y-wing squadron managed to penetrate the Coruscant system. The Imperial repair dock was in fact a modified BFF-1 bulk freighter. Despite the heavy resistance, the Rebels attacked the Imperial forces. The Alliance forces managed to take out most of the TIE fighters and bombers, along with the *Delta*-class transports and *Lambda*-class shuttles. When the Imperials discovered the attack, the *Vulture* was dispatched to save the facility. However, Red Leader eventually managed to destroy the drydock.

In order to learn more about the Death Star, Alliance Special Forces managed to sabotage and disable a *Delta*-class DX-9 stormtrooper transport, *Omicron 1*, that was carrying Imperial officers assigned to the Death Star as it traveled through the Corellian system.

The Alliance sent the shuttle *Hunter*, along with the frigate *Inad*, to capture the disabled transport. The operation was protected by X-wings from Blue Squadron and Y-wings from Red Squadron.

Soon after the mission began, several Assault Gunboats arrived. The Rebel fighters moved to intercept at the cost of many X-wings. The *Hunter* boarded the transport and captured the officers. However while both vessels were returning to the *Inad*, the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer *Immortal* arrived and began to launch TIEs. An Imperial transport also jumped out of hyperspace and attempted to recapture the fleeing transport. Keyan Farlander destroyed the attacking transport, and two more which arrived shortly afterward. However, both his wingmen were shot down while attempting to keep the Imperial fighters off his tail. Namrhe was killed but Omin-Oreh was rescued but severely injured.

As soon as both ships had boarded the *Inad*, the Rebels withdrew to hyperspace. The captured military advisors were unable to reveal much information except that Bevel Lemelisk was leading the design team and that some of his team had recently traveled to Coruscant for a meeting with Grand Moff Wilhuff Tarkin. The Alliance planned an assault on their ship.

During Operation Skyhook, the Empire made a surprise attack on the command ship *Defiance* near Bestine IV, site of an important Rebel base. The *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer *Immortal* just ended its hyperdrive jump next to the Mon Calamari Star Cruiser *Defiance*.

The Star Destroyer *Immortal* entered the system and deployed its TIEs. Red Squadron's X-wings and Blue Squadron's A-wings managed to destroy many Imperial starfighters and allowed the *Defiance* to escape in hyperspace.

The Imperial military advisors captured in the Corellian system were unable to provide many details of the Death Star Project except that the design team was lead by Bevel Lemelisk. They also knew that part of his team had recently traveled to Coruscant to meet with Grand Moff Tarkin. The Alliance High Command decided to capture the design team. Although the loss of the design team couldn't slow the progress on the Death Star, their capture might have helped the rebellion interpret the technical readouts en route with Princess Leia Organa.

Part of the Death Star design team was on their way to a rendezvous with the Star Destroyer *Immortal* in the corvette *Godar*.

While Blue Squadron's X-wings engaged the Gunboat and TIE escorts, Farlander's Y-wing disabled the *Godar*. A shuttle arrived in the system as soon as the corvette was disabled and boarded the corvette. With them was a squad of stormtroopers holding them as virtual prisoners. *Rescue 1* captured the personnel and fled into hyperspace.

With the Rebel Alliance attempting to find the location of the Death Star, Alliance Intelligence discovered that Imperial ships were using the base near Kalla VII for supplies and repairs on their way to the Death Star. General Jan Dodonna proposed to destroy the Imperial base to strand any passing ships heading for the battlestation, leaving them open to capture.

The plan involved three stages; destroying the base itself, conducting a raid to remove the escorts of the target ship and leave it defenseless and disabling and capturing the ship itself.

A group of starfighters was assembled for the first stage of the battle, with Keyan Farlander leading three X-wings from Red Squadron to destroy the base.

The mission was successful as the Rebels destroyed all supply containers, the defensive minefield and two BFF-1 bulk freighters from *Diputs* group. As the Rebels were preparing to leave, the Imperial EF76 Nebulon-B escort frigate *Priam* came out of hyperspace, killing Breth Gart in a freak collision when his fighter hit the ship.

With the *Priam* now stranded the Rebels prepared to move against it. In order to protect the stranded vessel, the Empire moved quickly to dispatch three CR90 corvettes from *Dar Es* group to protect it and also deployed a minefield around the ship. A *Delta*-class DX-9 stormtrooper transport was also dispatched to deliver supplies and personnel. The Rebels, meanwhile, prepared an assault to remove these defenses. Two R-22 Spearheads from Blue Squadron were to engage the *Priam*'s TIE fighters while two Y-wings from Red Squadron, again led by Farlander, were to destroy the corvettes with their proton torpedoes.

All three corvettes were quickly destroyed, as was the incoming transport and the Rebels withdrew leaving only the minefield and a handful of TIEs to defend the *Priam*. One R-22 was lost during the battle but a subsequent rescue operation retrieved the pilot who had been able to eject.

With the escort destroyed, General Dodonna gave the order for Alliance Special Forces to conduct a "board and capture" operation against the *Priam*. The Rebels sent a complete squadron of Y-Wings from Gold Squadron to disable the *Priam*, attacking in two groups of six. Keyan Farlander, having just returned to the Mon Calamari Star Cruiser *Independence* from the previous mission, immediately launched to support the operation, flying the only craft available, an R-22 Spearhead.

Farlander moved quickly to destroy the few remaining TIE/LN starfighters before they could pose a threat to the Y-wings and then proceeded to destroy the minefield while the Y-wings used their ion cannons to disable the *Priam*. The *Priam* made one last attempt to fight back, launching two TIE/sa bombers but they too were quickly destroyed.

After losing many Y-Wings, the *Priam* was finally disabled. The Y-wings withdrew while the Special Forces team moved in with transports from *Assault* group carrying commandos to board the frigate. Once captured, *Lambda*-class shuttles from *Panda* group delivered the new crew for the ship while transport group *Jordi* delivered supplies. Once all the transports were aboard, the Rebel forces, along with the newly captured frigate, jumped to hyperspace.

Despite Farlander having not been scheduled to fly in the final part of the battle, Commander Lagrane acknowledged during his debriefing that his actions had helped keep Rebel losses lower than expected.

Examining the frigate's database, the Alliance learned that the Death Star was located above Despayre. Corvette group *Ethar* was dispatched to the Horuz system to investigate.

The capture of the Frigate *Priam* revealed that the construction site of the Death Star was located in the Horuz system near the prison planet Despayre. Two Alliance CR90 corvettes collectively compromising *Ethar* was dispatched to the system to investigate, and found only the shattered remnants of the planet Despayre and no trace of the Death Star. However the Galactic Empire forces left in the system in anticipated the arrival of Rebel forces managed to capture the corvettes.

Further Alliance forces arrived in the system shortly after. While and X-wings from Red Squadron engaged the Imperial gunboats, Blue Squadron and Gold Squadron Y-wings disabled the corvettes. The two *Lambda*-class shuttles *Rogue* then arrived in the system and managed to recover the corvettes. *Ethar*

1 and *Ethar 2* eventually entered hyperspace and left the system, in Rebel hands once again.

The data collected by the corvettes in the Horuz system revealed to the Rebels that the Death Star was completely operational and had left Despayre to another destination.

Battlefront: Polis Massa- Birth of the Rebellion

"By the time of the raid on Polis Massa, the men of the 501st were starting to get a little sick of this so called Rebellion. In the past, we'd secretly enjoyed putting down a local insurrection or two. They kept the troops sharp and the Empire feared. But these rebels were different. They were organized, they were growing, and they were everywhere. The raid on Polis Massa was a perfect example of how things were starting to fall apart. We were supposed to go in, wipe out a small band of Rebels and recover some stolen Imperial plans on an encrypted holodisk. Before we knew it, we were nearly overrun by Rebel forces, with the holodisk nowhere to be found."

—Unnamed 501st stormtrooper

When cleaning up after the seemingly minor Death Star Uprising, the Empire had discovered that a few Rebels were able to transport vital information on Imperial plans away from the Death Star. Imperial intelligence uncovered an active Rebel base on Polis Massa and Darth Vader decided to send troops from his elite fighting legion, the 501st Legion, to recover the plans there, before the Rebels decoded them.

Once the 501st Legion arrived at the asteroid base, they executed their raid, taking control of the Rebel radar facility effortlessly.

Next, they attempted to storm an elevated command room where the holodisk, supposedly holding the stolen plans, had been located. However, approaching the stairs to the room, dozens of Rebels, including Wookiee Warriors, swarmed the hallway at the base of the stairs, killing nearby stormtroopers. A new Imperial wave cut down the exposed Rebels in short order.

The data was then removed from the disk and uplinked to the Imperial systems while the 501st were forced to hold strong the radar-communications facility which was now surrounded on all sides by Rebel soldiers.

Meanwhile, Imperial agents analyzing the data on the holodisk were shocked to discover it was a decoy. The 501st were left entirely cornered in the radar area.

Rebel charges were held off until uplink was complete. When 501st were contacted about the questioned legitimacy of the holodisk—now fighting for a lost cause and without further orders—their leaders commanded the men to fight on nevertheless. The tides turned miraculously and the 501st, in an astounding maneuver, broke free and scattered into the rest of the base.

While regrouping in different sections of the base, the 501st Legion was thankful to be at last given further instructions: they had to destroy a databank, in an area called the Cavern, through which Rebels were using to eavesdrop on the Empire's transmissions. Determined to stop this, the stormtroopers of the 501st fought their way deep into the base and destroyed the databank.

Secretly, exhausting stealth work by Bothan spies on the Rebel side had enabled them to beam the plans out of the Empire's grasp once again, substituting them with the copies on the holodisk.

However, if with no other objectives, the 501st Legion at least wanted to crush the Rebels of this base—the insurgents who had humiliated their legendary reputation in an obvious ambush—and escape from the asteroid with their lives. In the end, both would occur.

Rebel and Imperial sides piloted the same AAC-1 Hovertanks in the outside perimeters of the base until Rebels captured the central hangar. Always prepared, stormtroopers raided the hangar furiously, though, and it was firmly secured.

"Although the raid on Polis Massa was only a partial success, we finally had a lead on who had acquired the Death Star plans, which suited the 501st just fine"

—501st stormtrooper

When fighting died down, 501st officers now realized how much they had really diminished the Rebel defenders. With just a few more firefights, the base had been eradicated of Rebels completely. The conquered stronghold was not occupied for much longer, however, before the 501st shut it down and were shipped off on another mission to the Tatooine system.

It was not too long later that a rogue ambassador CR90 corvette, *Tantive IV* of Alderaan, had been traced by the Empire-acquired holodisk and was suspected to be the location of the genuine plans. The Empire was not about to be fooled again. Darth Vader would be leading the next attack personally.

Empire At War: AN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE EMPEROR

After learning that Bothan spies had supplied Kalast with the information about the Death Star he passed on to the Rebellion, Emperor Palpatine declared to punish the Bothans for their treachery himself.

Upon landing on Bothawui, Bothan officers greeted the Emperor, and were all slaughtered by the Dark Lord's Force lightning. The Sith and his Royal Guard unit proceeded into the city, where Palpatine brainwashed a number of Bothans with Force corrupt, and proceeded to destroy Bothan assets.

In the end, all the corrupted Bothans were turned on and killed. One Bothan, fearing for his life, told Palpatine that the Death Star plans were going to be beamed to the corvette *Tantive IV*, in the Tatoo system.

Palpatine regrouped with Darth Vader, who had learned the same thing during the raid on Polis Massa. Vader gathered his forces and moved the fleet to Tatooine.

Battlefront II: Tantive IV: Recovering the Plans

With the information gathered on Polis Massa, Vader concluded that the stolen plans had been given to Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan. We weren't surprised. For all their talk of being a peaceful planet, Alderaan had been thumbing its nose at the Empire for years. After a brief and pointless battle, we boarded the ship, the *Tantive IV*, over Tatooine, began looking for the plans, and waited for Lord Vader's arrival.

After Lord Vader took custody of Princess Leia, we all figured it was just a matter of time before she coughed up the plans. Many of us had been

unwilling witnesses to Vader's powers of persuasion in the past. The thought of a pampered little princess resisting his terrible will was inconceivable.

No Longer of Any Concern ...

(A holomessage to the Grand Moff's of the Galactic Empire from Ars Dangor, advisor to the Emperor.)

Loyal subjects,

We understand that you have been concerned of late about this "growing" rebellion. I have even heard concern about the support this rebellion has been gaining in the Imperial Senate.

Listen well. The Imperial Senate will no longer be of any concern to us. The Emperor has permanently dissolved that misguided body. The last remnants of the Old Republic have now been swept away.

Senatorial representation has not been formally abolished, you must understand. It has merely been superseded "for the duration of the emergency." If that duration remains a permanent fixture, so be it. You, the Emperor's regional governors, will now have direct control and a free hand in administering your territories. This means that the Imperial presence can at last be brought to bear properly on the vacillating worlds of the Empire.

From now on, fear will keep potentially traitorous local governments in line. Fear of the Imperial fleet — and fear of the new Death Star battle station.

Have I made myself clear?

For the Emperor,

Imperial Advisor Ars Dangor

The End of an Era

Prefect Orun Depp was toying with his breakfast when the officer appeared. He pushed around the contents of his plate, upon which was resting the remainder of his one thousand one hundred and thirty-eighth breakfast of poached Krayt egg and leg of Sandhawk. He welcomed the interruption. "Yes?"

Lieutenant Harburik controlled his impulse to sneer. "ComScan reports that a Star Destroyer and a small Corvette dropped out of hyperspace half an hour ago. There was some exchange of laser fire. Governor Aryon has asked you to handle the matter."

The Prefect stood, hurriedly swallowing the remaining bits of Krayt egg. "Well, now, that is news. Well, well. It's a good thing I — they'll have to parlay with me for the right to refuel, or whatever, right? Lieutenant, how much room is available in our jail?"

Harburik sighed. "Sir, we have the Tonnika sisters; a Human was arrested for impersonating an Imperial officer; a Gamorrean is charged with beating a civilian; and a Rodian was caught pickpocketing."

"Hmm. Better release the twins. I want to have enough room for —"

"Sir, the twins are by far the worst offenders of the lot!"

"Lieutenant. An Imperial Star Destroyer. *Here*. At Tatooine. Why, the implications of that are staggering. Well, now ..."

Harburik smiled to himself in anticipation of the reaction his next bit of news would have. "And, sir, they have just informed us they are sending down a detachment of stormtroopers."

The Prefect stared at Harburik as if he had three heads, and then began spinning around the room, bumping into everything. Harburik had the vague urge to grab the man as if he were a spinning top.

"Informed us? Not requested? What is the meaning of this? There are proper channels which must be followed, after all. Don't you agree, lieutenant? We

will see about this." Depp broke off and strode out of the room.

"Well, err, yes. Yes, sir," he repeated again for emphasis, inwardly gloating over the Prefect's discomfort as he followed the man through the building and into the control center.

"Let *me* talk to that captain. How dare he think he can simply send down troops without authorization."

Harburik excused the communications officer and sat at the console himself, signaling the Destroyer. Depp furiously paced the small room as the lieutenant tapped a few last controls and gestured over to the hologram pod. "Here you are, sir."

Depp stepped onto it, and as his image was being captured and transmitted to the Destroyer, a corresponding hologram formed in front of him.

"Now, just what is the meaning of this?" Depp began, but cut himself short as a chill swept through the chamber. "Why, err..."

The raven figure flickered. "I have no time for pleasantries, Prefect. I have ordered a detachment of troops down to Mos Eisley on official business —"

Depp clutched at every last wisp of fleeing outrage and swallowed hard. "Yes, but the proper channels need to be followed, uh, Lord Vader." He felt his resolve weakening. "Even one such as yourself, ur, understands the need for discipline in the ranks." His resolve wavered for a moment, then collapsed. "Isn't that right?"

The holo image continued as if it had never been interrupted. "— by order of the Emperor. Expect two more Star Destroyers which shall constitute a quarantine of Tatooine. Effective immediately. Is that clear, Prefect?"

"This, this is highly irregular ... but as you wish, Lord Vader." The image faded, and Prefect Depp turned to Harburik, pulling on his collar. "Make appropriate accommodations for the soldiers, lieutenant. I want them to be served in every way possible."

Artoo's Tale

A story told by the astromech droid Artoo-Detoo, with translation by his counterpart See-Threepio, to Voren Na'al.

Luke Skywalker had just gone off to dinner leaving the two new droids alone in the farm's workshop. Artoo was embarrassed by his deception of his new master, whom he quite liked, and angry that his friend, C-3PO, couldn't see the wisdom of his mission.

"Just you reconsider playing that message for him," C-3PO scolded. Artoo wanted to explain that his programming, directly from an important official aboard the ship, didn't allow him to play the message.

— *Threepio stopped at that moment, making what sounded suspiciously like an indignant snort. He simply looked sharply at Artoo, and said, "Well, you most certainly could have trusted me with that information, Artoo. If anyone could have assisted you, had I known, it would have been me!"* —

Threepio would have none of it. Artoo at least hoped that his new master, Luke, liked him. Artoo's behavior wasn't personal.

Shaking his metal head, C-3PO said, "No, I don't think he likes you at all." Threepio's limited patience had run out. "No, I don't like you either."

— *Threepio rather took exception to that last comment and took a few moments to discuss the matter with his stubby friend. Their discourse showed their friendship and camaraderie with more clarity than any verbal description could.* —

Artoo decided that it was time to act. His programming was explicit — Kenobi had to get that message, regardless of circumstances. With hardly a beep or whistle, Artoo rolled out of the workshop and into the desert as First Twilight fell across the sands.

First Dawn broke over the rocky canyon as the little droid continued on. It had taken longer than Artoo anticipated to cross the desert and make it to the canyon. Somehow, he'd managed to avoid conflicts with the Jawas or any of Tatooine's other denizens, and the cooler night temperatures made the journey much easier on his components.

He still had only a vague notion of where to find General Kenobi. That's when the landspeeder pulled up, and Luke Skywalker and See-Threepio jumped out to intercept him. His mission was over, and Master Luke was unlikely to fall for his deception about the restraining bolt a second time. He had failed! That's what he got for not monitoring his sensor scans.

"Hey, whoa, just where do you think you're going?" the young man asked. Artoo whistled a feeble reply that Threepio refused to dignify with a response. Threepio, still angry from their last exchange, answered. "Master Luke here is your rightful owner. We'll have no more of this Obi-Wan Kenobi gibberish and don't talk to me of your mission, either. You're

fortunate he doesn't blast you into a million pieces right here."

Sometimes the protocol droid could be so exasperating, thought Artoo. Dejected, he tried to think of something to do when his sensors had detected several beings moving in quickly. Artoo jumped up, throwing frantic whistles and screams at the unsuspecting duo.

"Oh my... sir," translated Threepio. "He says there are several creatures approaching from the southeast." Artoo knew his friend wouldn't suspect him of deception in this instance — besides, there was no way he could outrun Luke's landspeeder.

Luke grabbed his blaster. "Sand People! Or worse! Come on, let's go have a look. Come on." The young man had an unnerving desire for adventure and excitement.

The young man and the tall droid moved off to investigate. Artoo scanned the immediate area while doing what any brave droid in his position would do. He went into the rocky crags to hide.

Artoo heard the sounds of a scuffle, but his range of sensors was obscured by the crags he had hidden in. He preferred the security of the rocks.

It was a while before anyone returned. Artoo watched as a group of vicious Sand People walked into view, dropping Luke beside his landspeeder. They began to ransack the speeder, leaving the unconscious youth in a heap upon the ground. Artoo could only hide and watch as the creatures tossed equipment all over the place. Where was poor See-Threepio?

Suddenly, the Sand People stopped. A deathly quiet fell over the canyon, and even Artoo felt a tingle play across his metal casing. A great howling moan echoed through the canyon. It was terrifying!

The Sand People fled in terror, and Artoo moved even tighter into the shadows as the sound got closer. But instead of a horrible creature, the droid saw a shabby, hooded figure appear and lean over Luke. He had an ancient, leathery face, set off by dark, penetrating eyes and a scraggly white beard.

After scrutinizing Luke's condition, the man turned to look directly at Artoo, who was still hiding in the shadows. He threw back his hood and smiled. "Hello there! Come here, my little friend. Don't be afraid."

Artoo wondered how the man had sensed him. He had remained absolutely still, not making a sound or moving. There was something strange about this kindly man.

It was upon Luke's awakening, and his declaring that this person was Ben Kenobi that Artoo knew this was the man he was sent to find. This was the famous General Obi-Wan Kenobi. Artoo's circuits beamed with pride, confident that he had succeeded where most other droids would have failed!

Imperial Troop Transport

Darth Vader's[™] final orders crackled through each Trooper's headset. The words were chillingly clear, "Either come back with the plans or don't come back at all!"

It seemed impossible! Two mindless *droids*[™] had made off with design prints of the Empire's most devastating weapon...*Death Star!*[™]

As the search squad left the Imperial Cruiser, a report came through from the on-board Scanning Stations. The *droids'* Escape Pod had been tracked to an arid region on Tatooine known as the Central Lowlands. The exact ground position had been lost as the Pod went beyond the Scanner's range, but, in all that sand, a metal Pod should not be hard to find, not with the *Imperial Troop Transporter!*[™]

Landing at pre-set coordinates, the *Troop Transporter of the Imperial Empire* was there to meet them...long, sleek, deadly, with the Imperial Crest over the side hatches. The great, steel blue craft was operated by two drivers and could hold all six members of the search squad. Each Trooper entered a Traveling Rack on the side of the Transporter. They rode standing up in individual racks since their white and black armor made it almost impossible to sit. The rear of the vehicle contained a Prisoner Immobilization Unit for the detention and taming of renegade droids. And, for heavy resistance, there was always the Laser Blaster mounted on the upper deck. Even at night, the Transporter looked fearsome with the glare of its black, flip-up lights.

One driver reported that *Dewback*[™] ground units had spotted the Pod just a short distance to the north. Not bad for a *Dewback* outfit! But, the Transporter would take over the search from that point. It could cover twice the distance in half the time.

The Transporter hovered a few feet above the surface and sped to the Pod landing sight, but the droids and the plans had long since gone. They

left only two sets of tracks in the sand that were spared by the mid-day winds. The *Dewback* had already gone after one set of tracks. The Transporter locked onto the other set and headed east.

The Surface Scanner in the Transporter soon picked up an old Class “D” transport slogging through the sand. Something the *Jawas*[™] called a *Sandcrawler*.[™] Over the external sound system, they were ordered to halt in the name of the Empire. They kept moving. Two rounds were fired across the *Sandcrawler* bow from the 50 megatome Blaster on the upper deck. The *Jawas* stopped and came out to greet the Imperial boarding party.

They had many *droids* in their inventory, but not the ones *Darth Vader* wanted back. Two *droids* were looted from the cargo bay and placed in the *Droid* Prisoner Compartment for further “questioning”. A sale had been recorded to one Owen Skywalker of two *droids* for his moisture farm. That’s all the Troop Commander had to hear. The order was given to open fire and the *Jawas* were cut down in mid-step... defenseless.

As the *Transporter* left to find the Skywalker farm, the heavy gun fired once at the Sandcrawler's mid-section. It exploded and burst into flames.

Force Commander

Desert Training

On Tatooine, Zeta Squad (including Brenn and Dellis Tantor, under Captain Terrik) are ordered to find an escape pod (C-3PO and R2-D2's from the Tantive IV), but when they find it empty, they head off to find the droids that were inside. They quickly discover the sandcrawler that carries the droids, but before they can get to it, they are set upon by Sandpeople, whom they wipe out. They then destroy the sandcrawler, finding the droid targets gone. Splitting up, Zeta forces head for the Lars Moisture farm (under Terrik) and Anchorhead (under Brenn) to find the droids . . .

Spare Parts

"You tell him!"

Despite being somewhat ineffective through his thick gloves, Lhojugg wrung his hands to accompany his pacing. Fortuna's nonchalance was beginning to eat away at his patience.

"It was you, Lhojugg, who was responsible for the Master's townhouse during our guest's stay," said the Twi'lek. His head-tails twitched in synch to the smile spreading across his pale face.

The two passed the carved archway into the smoke, dank and criminal bustle of Jabba the Hutt's Townhouse throne room. The room was filled, alcove to alcove, with all manner of seedy bounty hunters. It was posting time, an annual event as recorded on the Tatooine calendar. For two days straight the Hutt crime lord had been handing out bounty notices to hunters new and old.

Bib Fortuna and Lhojugg the Nimbanel cautiously parted their way between two large armored Trandoshans, moving closer to the center of affairs: the raised dais of the Hutt crime lord.

"Ahh Bib, Lhojugg... tee hyatt. Bo shuda," prompted the gristly slug-like gangster, curling his words around the smoking end of his hookah. Jabba pushed aside a datapad and gave a number of deeds to his silvery protocol droid standing behind him.

A slight silence followed, although Lhojugg was certain the entire galaxy could hear the collision of his knees. He cleared his throat, hand-groomed the red tufts of hair growing from the sides of his snout, and stepped forward.

"Most masterful sire, I'm afraid I must announce a discrepancy in my last inventory of the townhouse."

Jabba's large slit-pupilled eyes glanced to the translator droid for a moment, and then paused for the Nimbanel to spit it out. Obfuscation, he mused, the language of bureaucrats and Nimbanese.

"It appears that our guests may have made themselves too much at home on their last stay," piped in Fortuna.

"Hmm, it took you two days to determine that Mcgrrrr stole something?" rumbled the Hutt.

"Yes, Master. Of course, as you know, the damage deposits do cover the standard party requirements, replacement of wall-hangings, veterinarian checks on your kayven whistlers, replacement of walls... But I'm afraid something somewhat irreplaceable is missing," said Lhojugg. "One of your droids, Master. From accounting, reference number CZ-3, I'm afraid."

It was all Fortuna could do to suppress a tentacle giggle-wiggle. Not 20 minutes ago Lhojugg was hollering at the top of his lung about the missing droid, and now he was reporting the event with the ferocity of a sand-mouse. He could be so spineless at times. Of course, Fortuna's own bracing of himself was a matter of protocol, not fear. Of course.

There was an awed silence, aside from the rustling of modern armor as the roomful of bounty hunters shifted position to watch the mighty Hutt chew out his lackeys.

"Hawr hawr hawr hawr," the Hutt's chuckle echoed in the hall. "Well, this most important matter must be handled immediately." The Hutt's massive smiling head turned on what passed as a neck, scanning the assembled hunters. "Takeel, closs niat lie!"

A gasp worked its way around the room, followed by the clatter of metallic spheres and the shuffle of footfalls as a Sniwian pulled himself out of the crowd, chasing after the ammunition for his primitive weapon. "Yes, your ... uh, Huttiness?"

Jabba looked over the hunched, overweight Snivvian with unkempt hair. "Congratulations, you have pulled the first bounty of the day. You are to find a most valuable piece of property, starting at Docking Bay 83. Mcgrrrr's ship should still be in port. Of course, you realize the importance of being inconspicuous, don't you, Takeel?"

"Uhh... i-inconspicuous?" Takeel stuttered as the protocol droid handed him a fresh warrant.

"I'm counting on you, Takeel."

"Yes, of course, sir. I not fail you!" shouted Takeel, as he rushed out of the throne room, barely managing the exit.

For a moment, a silence crystallized over the room, followed immediately by a resounding guffaw initiated by Jabba, seconded by his Kowakian jester Salacious Crumb, and carried out by all in the room.

Lhojugg and Fortuna stood stunned, staring at each other. Jabba's massive belly-laughs subsided enough for him to shout to the assembled bounty hunters, "Snaggletooth, look after your brother."

The suns beat down with their relentless regularity on Mos Eisley's center, causing the sandstone structures to shimmer with the haze of heat. Despite this, Macemillian Winduarté walked with a skip in his step and a catchy tune in his head. He skipped out of the cantina, heading to his shop in the shade of the wreckage in the center of Mos Eisley.

Mace threw a small restraining bolt from hand to hand, admiring its shine as it twirled. Mace, a Squib, always had an attraction for the shinier things in life. It was for this reason he abandoned his position in the Squib Reclamation Fleet and became a droid dealer on Tatooine. At times, his partner, the Jawa Aguilae, could be a spoiler to his fun, but the two managed to barely pull a profit each season.

He walked into the small structure nearly concealed by a pile of refuse and scrap, into the relative coolness of his shop/room. His sensitive smell receptors on his arms picked up on the stench that Aguilae was in here recently. He had since grown used to the scent of Jawa. It wasn't that bad, to his thinking. It was much better than that of an Ugor.

Mace placed the restraining bolt in a worn and pitted spice rack barely hanging on his wall. He hoisted himself to his bed, which was actually a bantha-skin comforter spread over the rusted ring of a chandelier. He closed his large doe-eyes, dreaming pleasant nikta-inspired dreams.

His tipsy reverie was interrupted as Aguilae entered his room, rifling through a bin for coolant tubing. An unwritten rule at the Jawa Trader's shop is if you can't find it, look in Mace's room.

"I sold that droid you picked up," squawked Aguilae's hand-held transliterator. She hadn't mastered Basic, and the salvaged translator unit sufficed, when it worked.

"Snnzzleggg..." replied Mace.

"Asleep again?" Aguilae shook her head, fine layers of dust shaking off her hood. "I swear Mace, I don't know how you get anything done." She kept rifling through Mace's stuff, opening the spice rack. The restraining bolt fell onto the floor.

"Mace..." Aguilae called. "Great Jawenko, Mace, where did you get this? Mace, wake up. "

Mace half-opened his eyes, slowly bringing the Jawa and the restraining bolt into focus. "Hmm... what? Oh, the bolt. It was from the koovy white-type standing-upright droid I found for you."

"The business droid? The droid I just sold? Mace get down, this is imported--" Aguilae stopped, banged the transliterator against a table. "Mace, this is important."

"What, what is it, Aggy?" asked Mace, rubbing his eyes, plopping down from the chandelier.

"This," said Aguilae, shoving the bolt in the Squib's snout. She nodded at the raised lettering on the bolt's rim. In aurebesh it read "Jabba the Hutt."

"Aggy..." grinned Mace, "You know I can't read."

* * *

"Gone?"

"Yes, sir," said the long-snouted Jenet lackey with a shiny borgbrace wrapped around the base of his skull.

Opun Mcgrrrr hoisted up the belt on his shaggy tunic, twisting his face in a visage of anger and incredulity.

"When did we lose the blasted droid? The thing had mighty important files in it."

"Well, sir," the Jenet reported. "It would seem that yesterday, while you were making certain arrangements with Lady Valarian, the droid went missing from your rented garage. I've questioned the locals, but they couldn't seem to care less."

"You did mention my name, didn't you," questioned Mcgrrrr. The burly Corellian had an ego well supported by his ample frame.

"Yes, sir" sighed the Jenet, again wondering how and why he was in this current position. "Much to my incredible amazement, it seemed to have no effect."

"Strange... that droid must be found. Retrieve it, and do not rest until you find it." Mcgrrrr spun around, taking a belt of whatever liquid he kept in his silver flask.

Ten thousand kilo-tremes of data storage capacity, and I'm playing lost and found. "Yes, sir," the Jenet said aloud. "May I add, sir, that looking for droids appears to a popular past-time on Tatooine at this moment?"

"The Imperials... that's right." Opun's single eyebrow bent in pondering. A team of stormtroopers was spotted in Mos Eisley this week. Everyone knew that stormtroopers were rarely seen in Mos Eisley, but this past week was strange. "Best to avoid them."

"Unerring strategy, sir," the Jenet said as part of his amplified brain worked on hyperspace algorithms in order to inject some amusement in his dismal day.

* * *

The dim conference room in the townhouse echoed with the clacking and blipping of Lhojugg's datapad. He pondered the situation over and again. Fortuna poked his head and one of his head-tails into the room.

"It doesn't make sense, Fortuna. According to the inventory, CZ-3 is supposed to hold class-red information. It's listed here as one of Master's principal business droids. I can't figure it out." Lhojugg nibbled on the stylus for a moment. "Why did the Jabba leave it out in the open?"

"Then don't figure it out." The wheels of Fortuna's mind clicked. To make a Nimbanel solve a puzzle, be sure to give him the right incentive. "I don't think Jabba expects you to."

The sneer that crossed Lhojugg's face caused the stylus to clatter on the desk. "This is business, Fortuna. And our Master's business is my business. You do little more than announce those who come before him."

"Of course, Lhojugg," said Bib, bowing out the door. The current storm has almost passed, and the patient Twi'lek reaps the rewards, as the saying went. The palace was soon to have a vacancy.

* * *

"Okay, okay, it'll be okay... we'll just explain to Jabba... that we accidentally..." Aguilae was pacing as she and Mace wandered through the sandy streets of Mos Eisley. Aguilae stopped and turned, realizing the Squib was not there.

"Mace... hkeek nkulla!" She cursed, a particularly nasty Jawa disparagement alien to the transliterator's database. She tiptoed a few meters, in a futile attempt to peek past the relative giants wandering the streets.

"All right," she heard, "let's say you gave the Quarren half of my order, but he must give me the money he was to pay you, yet you still retain the interest, but you allow me to have the topping of my choice." Through the woven hood, Aguilae's accurate ears were able to trace the Squib to where her nose told her dewback ribs were roasting.

There, in the shade of a striped awning, stood the tiny Squib before a two-meter tall Whiphid. The betusked shaggy mountain of muscle did not seem amused, and the squid-faced Quarren behind him seemed remarkably confused. The Whiphid's nostrils twitched, and he looked in Aguilae's direction.

"Jawa, tell your partner that we don't serve him anymore," growled the tooth face. His clawed hand grasped the sauce brush with a cluster of clenched tendons.

"My apologies, Fillin... my partner, of course, enjoys your wares so..."

The jittery Jawa pushed the Squib aside. "Mace, we are leaves..." a slight adjustment, "we are leaving." She bowed away from the Whiphid, while Mace hollered something about renegotiation.

"Mace," she said, spinning the Squib to face her. "We don't have time for this. That trader can be anywhere. We have to find him."

"Aggy, Aggy, Aggy," Mace shook his short muzzle, "I was going to ask for information as part of a sidebar bargain concerning the amount of napkins. You have to understand the rules of the street."

"No. You have to understand that the Bloated One has a thousand eyes, and twice as many hkedds--" twist a dial here, "--twice as many ears. If he finds out it was us who caused one of his droids to disappear, we're Sarlacc-stoppers. And Jabba's not the type to negotiate."

"Not negotiate?" the Squib's eyes widened, "and Hutts are civilized? Bizarre."

The two small droid dealers crossed from the busy marketplace to the speeder rentals shop. It was Aguilae's hope that the trader she sold the droid to rented the speeder she saw him use, and that the Arcona dealer at the shop would recognize the description.

"Hmmm..." the Arcona carefully scratched his leathery brow with one of his massive claws. Wrinkles formed on the corner of his aged, glittery green eyes as he probed his memory. "Yeah, I think the fella you're describing was Corellian. Right. He rented the Mobquet, he did. I'll look it up in the records, but only if you can fix those brath bearing brackets."

"Not a problem, Unut. Tomorrow morning, you'll get them." Visions of a happy twin sunset were dancing in Aguilae's head. They were going to get through this. "Mace, get off of there."

The Squib sat in the worn saddle of a sleek Starhawk speeder bike, leaning back, pretending to be riding a bucking bantha. The speeder rocked on its support blocks, its repulsor field inactive due to faulty brath brackets. As usual, Mace's own little world precluded Aggy's nagging.

"Mace... " the Jawa straightened as the Arcona returned, plugging away at a large-button datapad.

"Here we go," said the old-timer. "Yep, I've got his name, and his docking bay, too." He turned the datapad to face Aguilae, and she stood on her toes as her eyes gobbled the data.

"A many tanks--" better to flick the transliterator switch on and off real quick, "thanks, Unut. You'll have that speeder up and running by next midday."

* * *

The last of the bounty postings had been delivered, and now Jabba relaxed to a recorded piece from the Modal Nodes. His tail swayed to the slow, Wroonian blues rhythm of Talcharaim Mist-Night in 4/4 time. Even Salacious was remarkably somber in the dim townhouse throne room.

And then the moment was ruined.

"Your eminence," called Lhojugg, walking briskly into the room. The two Gamorreans at the door, who had been soothed by the music, snorted in his direction, their hands moving to their axes.

"Huuooaa..." grunted the Hutt, his eyes opening wide, and then reducing to slits. "What is it, Lhojugg? This had better be good."

"Y-yes, sir." Lhojugg swallowed, his mouth impossibly dry. He consulted the datapad in his hand. "Sir, I've found evidence of conspiracy. Here, in this very townhouse."

"Oh? How so?" the Hutt's tubby hands clenched into impatient fists.

"Upon further investigation of the whole CZ-3 matter, I discovered that the droid, which has a class-red security designation, was transferred just prior to Mcgrrrr's visit. Through some sort of incredibly inept clerical error, outside of my department, the droid was left in the open storage receptacle in the townhouse when potentially hostile visitors, Mcgrrrr and company, were present. I tried to track to the error back to the source, and discovered that whoever changed the placement order used your clearance. Someone used your pass-codes, sire!" Lhojugg finished, with more than a small sense of pride. His dramatic lecture-style pacing brought him into the center of Jabba's throne room.

There was a hiss of air as Jabba exhaled forcefully through his large nostrils. "Lhojugg, you have erred. I did not ask you for this investigation." The Hutt's greasy fingers danced over the controls on his armrest. The Talcharaim Mist-Night had since increased in tempo, to symbolize the tempestuous mist-gales

that inspired the song. The Gamorreans each took a step back, and Salacious' gaze was fixated on the dark ceiling.

"Sir, I... I was merely concerned about the security of--" Lhojugg stuttered.

"Your investigation is over." Jabba pressed a small ultrasonic squelch button on his armrest. A rust-encrusted cage crashed down over the Nimbanel, and the Hutt helped himself to a fat toad as creaky chains lifted the cage up to the ceiling.

As the song reached its hurricane-crescendo, the cage lifted past the wire-mesh screen keeping back the hungry kayven whistlers. The strong blasts of kloo horns and Dorenian Beshniuel created a cacophony of flats to Lhojugg's sharp screaming. By the time the music settled back to its quietly introspective coda, the whistlers had eaten, and the rustling of the mesh had ended. The drops of blood that fell from the ceiling created a syncopated rhythm the Bith musicians would have most likely enjoyed.

* * *

The trip to Docking Bay 87 had proven to be a partial success. The Corellian trader that the Arconan speeder dealer had directed them to did indeed recognize Aguilae, if not Mace. While the trader forcibly complained about the quality of the business droid Aguilae had sold him, the Squib entertained himself by studying the shinier parts of the trader's freighter.

"Its processors must have been sun-fried," the trader had said, peppering his speech with a few Socorran curses. "The thing didn't even have enough sense to follow me."

After demanding a full refund, which Mace managed to bargain down to a half-refund, a new transponder coupler, and the recipe to his mother's almond-kwewu crisp-munchies, the trader conceded, and said he sold the droid back to another group of Jawas. By the description of the cloak patterns and merchandise, Aguilae was able to figure out it was Jek Nkik's group.

The two dealers returned to Unut's shop, and rented a speeder to go into the patch of wastes where Nkik's sandcrawler was known to patrol. The two

dealers not only had to pay the Arcona for the speeder, but they also promised to replace the entire control/ interface units on the Starhawk speeder.

This is getting expensive, Aguilae thought, wiping a patch of grime from the inside of the Mobquet speeder's windscreen. Mace was, as always, maddeningly oblivious, sticking his head away from the windscreen, his gray fur bristling in the wind. His eyes glinted behind the mismatched goggle lenses.

"Mace, you'll get sandflies in your teeth," said Aguilae.

"I haven't eaten yet, Aggy." the Squib whined.

"You ate all my snit-spore snacks!"

"That's snacking, not eating."

She shook her head, and instead concentrated on what approach she would take with Jek. She adjusted the trim on the speeder's control, smoothing out the travel over the rocky terrain.

Jek and Aguilae were passing acquaintances, but most Jawas who operated around Mos Eisley knew of her from her shop. Despite this, Aguilae was quite uneasy. She never got along with other Jawas, and was an outcast among her people. She preferred mechanical company to those of her species. She stomached Mace because he managed to show some profit, but the competitive nature among Jawas often bothered her. She knew Nkik would only take hard cash, and their reserves were dwindling.

"Aggy, big-Jawa metal-thing-ship! Over at there-o'clock!" Mace squeaked.

Aguilae squinted her shining eyes, seeing the hulking vehicle as a mere speck on the horizon. This was Nkik's territory, all right. She fired the Mobquet's overdrive, leaning into a hard turn, and kicking a spew of gravel and sand behind them.

* * *

It had taken nearly three hours for Takeel to find Docking Bay 63, and another hour for him to walk there. Of course, behind him he left a trail of passersby clued into his search as he asked them for directions. The hunch-backed Snivvian wandered past the small tapcafe built out of a small adobe hut, looking for last minute visual clues, such as a number 83, when his memory failed him.

"Excuse me," he stammered to a trader walking by.

"Don't touch me."

"Uhh... pardon me," he stuttered to a militia man.

"I have no change."

"One moment, if I could..." he faltered to a moisture farmer.

"Blasted street scum, out of my way."

"I was wondering..." he fumbled to a white droid.

"Bzz-nkk, bzz-nkk."

Takeel looked at the malfunctioning droid -- a tall, battered white droid. It shook its head as if its seals were not tightened around its neck. At the very least, it seemed to acknowledge the Snivvian in its near-empty photoreceptor.

"Do you know where docking bay 83 is?" he asked.

The droid stopped in its tracks. For a moment, it seemed as if it were to fall over, but instead, it prodded its arm toward the direction from where it had wandered.

"A thousand thank-yous, sir," said the Snivvian, leaving a trail of pellet-style ammunition behind in his path.

* * *

Aguilae slowed the Mobquet to come parallel with the lumbering crawler. The din of ancient metal, poorly lubricated servos, and shuddering steel overcame the whine of the repulsorlifts. She pulled out a small, scratched comlink from one of her pockets, and keyed a standard Jawa channel.

"Nkkek, hkkeuika, obvioaga," she hissed, her transliterator not picking up from its place on Mace's seat. Mace, in the meantime, was leaning out the speeder, waving like a windmill.

For a few moments, it seemed as if the sandcrawler was to continue, but a sharp squeal of angry engines brought the crawler to a halt. Mace, of course, thought his waving did the job. Aguilae brought the speeder tight to the crawler's ramp, and rehearsed her monologue in her head one more time.

With a veritable shriek, the lethargic crawler lowered the ramp, and several pairs of sickly glowing eyes peered from the darkness. "Hkekk, Aguilae," a voice croaked out from above, with an unmistakable contempt applied to the name.

Traders and humans often joked that Jawas were nothing to be afraid of, but now, the mob of five or so, looking down the ramp, blasters drawn, were enough to make Aguilae's stomach quiver. Mace, predictably, was still waving.

The Jawas parted, and Jek stepped out, his arms open. "Aguilae, you spoke of a deal?" he croaked in his native tongue. The Jawa, with a tan and brown cloak stitched together, walked down the ramp. He had his tooled blaster tucked in his belt, but there was no mistaking its presence, and the swagger that accompanied it. The four other Jawas followed, several steps behind Jek. Their eyes never left the speeder.

Aguilae, the name humans gave her, inhaled, steeling her pride. With it, she caught a whiff of the disgust and disdain the Jawas were emitting. She had discarded her Jawa name, to live and sell among the humans, and they had not forgotten. She made sure to tuck away the transliterator; no need to goad these five on any more than necessary.

Show no fear, show no fear, show no fear.

"Yes, Jek," she spoke in her tongue, "a deal that you shall find quite profitable."

"Truly. Now, you understand that this is our territory," Jek hissed, his hand caressing the clay handle of his blaster. "This makes your presence even less welcome."

He must have smelled the fear, Aguilae thought. She instead concentrated on her hunger. Hunger and fear smelled very similar to Jawas, so she thought hard on the empty stomach and the snitspore snacks that Mace had eaten. A touch of loathing wouldn't be too bad right now, either.

"So even you must understand the magnitude of the deal that would bring me out this far." Aguilae responded coolly. One of the Jawas behind Jek whistled a laugh.

"Aguilae, or Khea Nkuul, have you forgotten what this double sunrise brought today?"

"Today?" she paused. The use of her name had thrown her, but today... Her birthday? The start of the storm season? The end of the growing season? No. That wasn't it.

Then she pieced it together, a tribute to her skills as a scavenger. The crawler, following its course past Mos Eisley, to these parts, on its way to the swap: the annual meeting of all the Jawa sandcrawlers in the area to exchange goods.

Then she placed the scent the Jawas exuded. Avarice, stronger than usual. Her eyes followed the gaze of the four Jawas behind Jek, and they all were staring at the shiny speeder.

Jek drew his blaster, as the quartet of Jawas each brandished hydrospanners like clubs. "It's time you came home."

* * *

The shaking of the sandcrawler made Aguilae's work even harder. She was tucked into a cramped sleeping compartment in the uppermost of the crawler's 15 levels. The dented metal door was locked shut. Twin worn plastic straps dug into her shoulders, and this particular sleeping module was designed for a taller Jawa since her feet failed to touch the floor. She rocked

back and forth, making her almost drop the delicate piece she was working on. She twisted small screws free with her thumbnail, and used what little light her eyes generated to work on the wiring. A few more touches, and she'd be done.

A trail of scent, this time of curiosity and something else, wafted to her nostrils. She tucked away her tinkering as the door opened, shedding the dim corridor light into Aguilae's eyes. Jek cast a shadow over her, undoing the braces that kept her slung to the wall.

"Were these accommodations really necessary?" she hissed, rubbing her shoulder.

"There's wisdom in precautions; it's what the elders teach us." Jek lowered her to the deck. "But, that's right -- you haven't heard the words of the elders in, what, eight seasons?"

"Seven and a half, actually." She pushed Jek's arms back, brushing the sand from her tunic. She took a look around. Without the blindfold they forced her to wear before they placed her in the sleeping closet, she could finally see the crowded, oxidized compartments in the upper level. The sunlight spilling in from the left showed her that the bridge was nearby. A group of Jawas stood clustered on the right. Their stench showed significant annoyance. She looked a moment longer and saw the gray-furred Squib among them, staring at the ceiling of the compartment.

"I'm surprised you noticed." Aguilae added, her eyes darting from corner to corner.

"I've been keeping an eye on you, Khea." Jek paced, holding a droid caller in his hand, supposedly examining it with interest. "You know what they say about you, don't you? You know what your tribe is going through?"

"No," she said, wondering how long she would have to humor him, "but I'm sure you'll tell me."

"I won't have to. They're certain to be at the swap, and we'll finally put you where you belong. You must follow our ways, Khea. A female just cannot abandon her role in the tribe and the meets. It's dangerous."

Somewhere in the dark folds of her hood, Aguilae grimaced. So, this is how it's going to be. She paused, letting Jek savor his last glottal syllable, all the while trying to dredge up those holovids that Mace had gotten from a Dorcin traveler. How did they go...

"Is that it?" she said, louder than she intended. "Is that it, really?" The other Jawas moved closer, their scents betraying their curiosity. Again, Aguilae concentrated on her hunger so that her excitement would not come through in her scent.

"What do you mean?" asked Jek.

"Oh, come on, Jek. You expect me to believe that you're taking me all the way back to the swap with you just to teach me an elder lesson?" She walked closer to him, an action he obviously was not expecting. "That you would remotely jeopardize your claim to that speeder by having me along? Why not be honest for a change. I'm not some farmer you're trying to hoodwink."

For a brief moment, while quoting the dialogue some Ho'Din floozy had recorded on another world untold years ago, before undoubtedly going on to a multi-holo contract, Aguilae regretted concentrating on her stomach. These words were making her queasy.

"There are those fire-eyes I've missed," Jek smiled, reaching his grubby little hands to touch her shoulders.

"Just try it, Jek. I don't care. Take me back to my father. Even if he decrees it, I will not bond with you." She let the last word hiss off her lips, with all the intensity she could muster. Inside, a part of her giggled. Jawas, she mused, they may know droids, but they're strangers to grade-b holomelodrama.

Jek stomped his foot on the ground. "It is the way, Khea!"

"NJeko! It's your way. Not mine."

For a moment or two, all that was heard was the ubiquitous rumbling of sandcrawler treads. Jek fumed, filling the compartment with his stench of impotent rage. He turned, looking at the Jawas peering in from the corner.

"Put her away," croaked Jek. "We'll let her father deal with her." Jek stormed out of the chamber as the other Jawas grabbed Aguilae and forced her into the compartment. She did her best to feign a struggle, all the while peering past the Jawas.

Her cue had been received. Mace was not there.

* * *

It was as if it was Haggleday morning, and Mace was but a fuzzling again. The hairs on his arms bristled as he looked around the room into which he had squeezed his tiny frame.

There, in the corner, was a canted R1 unit. Tucked away under a pile of optical cabling was the pot-belly shape of a BM-B unit. A charred WED 15 unit had become little more than a hodgepodge of manipulators, but it was still enough to make Mace's heart soar. He tried to run in seven directions at once, and ended up sitting down, catching his breath.

He collected his flighty mind and got a better sense of his environs. It was quite ingenious, actually. The room was a hidden compartment of sorts, its angles lined with heavy steam venting pipes. If any competing Jawa tribes had a hold of sensor technology, this room would read as a hot spot, but no details within could be gleaned.

In this case, it was the repulsorlift signature of their speeder that would be concealed. Mace jumped behind the controls, taking a cursory look at the dash. The readouts looked positive; it seems the Jawas hadn't had a chance to give it the once-over, yet. A little voice inside his head brought him back to the situation at hand. Aguilae had given him a chance, and he couldn't miss it. But he wouldn't leave without her.

He reached into one of his hidden pockets, plucking out a handful of chronometers. He quickly found the one that worked. Fifteen minutes. He'd give her fifteen minutes.

In the meantime, he thought, as his gaze came across a slightly carbonized red R5 unit and a power droid, he'd best find a way to keep himself busy.

* * *

About five hours ago the Jenet had immediately determined a search radius based on the average foot speed of a Delban Serv-O-Droid CZ unit, with about 15 or 20 years' worth of wear on a pelvic servomotor.

Of course, the outside odds of probability always had a way of presenting themselves to the Jenet, and it wasn't until the last 200 meters of his search that he spotted something.

The Jenet toggled down the throttle switch on his small repulsorscooter and came to a hover as he pulled out a pair of macrobinoculars. He was about 10 kilometers from the town center now, where the domed buildings were fading away into the sands like some desert mirage. He allowed a quick grimace as the image intensifiers brought his quarry into view.

Tucked away, on the sunlit side of a small adobe garage, between a vaporator and a garbage bin, was a white humanoid droid, attempting to walk through the wall. The amount of sand it had kicked up behind it indicated that it had been there for, oh, 15 minutes, according to the Jenet's calculations. The droid seemed to pay very little attention to the fact it kept walking into the wall, and it carried on, following its distorted programming.

The Jenet looked around, eyeing no scavengers, and parked his speeder. He walked toward the garage, stowing away his macros. With the droid on the sun-side, and most of the vagrant Jawa scavengers clustered in the shadows of the buildings, it was spared.

Giving the droid a visual inspection, the Jenet surmised that either the droid had simply had its logic reactors burned out from the heat, or was loaded with so much extra software that its primary processors were slowing down to the state of mechanical senility. This almost evoked a chuckle from the Jenet. Why anyone would load such a faulty, outdated model with any software was beyond his computing.

He paused when he saw that the restraining bolt that should have been on the droid's chest was gone. He quickly dismissed it, applied a fresh bolt imprinted

to Opun "The Black Hole" Mcgrrrr, led the droid back to his scooter, and while he secured it with some syntherope, ran through his long memory of other Jenets who had considerably better careers than he did.

* * *

The sandcrawler had stopped. There was some commotion coming from the bridge, but Aguilae instead concentrated on closing the small hatch on her transliterator. They couldn't have arrived at the swap yet. It was too soon. The small plastic piece clicked into place, and she turned her attention to what was happening beyond the metal door of her compartment. From the smell of things, Jek and the Chief were gone. There was only one other Jawa, either tired or bored, probably in the control room.

Aguilae closed her eyes, made a silent promise to her gods, and hit the switch on the jury-rigged transliterator. "Quickly, get the prisoner out, now!" the small device squawked in Jawa, in a near approximation of Jek's voice.

She tucked the device away and grabbed onto the straps supporting her shoulders. She pulled herself up on them, bending her legs and placing them against the door. She smelled the lone Jawa come closer and fiddle with the locking mechanism. She listened for the final click.

She then kicked with all her strength. There was a dull thud as the door flew open, sending the Jawa reeling. The hapless hooded scavenger flew into a discarded pile of oxidized cowlings, crumpling into an unconscious heap.

Aguilae used the sharpened end of a conductor strip she had pulled out of the transliterator, and cut the shoulder straps. She dropped down on all fours, taking a quick look around. No one was there, save for the incapacitated guard. She skittered to him, gave his equipment pouches a quick inspection, pocketed a few pieces, and scooted to the bridge.

The controls, as would be expected, were a mess of sand-encrusted screens, levers and toggle-switches either taped down or held in place with flexor cord. Entire banks of displays had burned out and had since been transformed into makeshift storage bays, full of droid heads and useless electronics. She peered out the viewport and immediately ducked down.

Imperials! she thought. Had they seen me?

She dared a second look. There, outside, in front of the crawler, several white-armored stormtroopers with colored shoulder guards stood over a group of Jawas. The chief, Jek, and three others were there, gesticulating wildly about something. The troopers were all armed. Heavily armed.

Off to the north, barely visible behind a ridge, was a vehicle almost as large as a sandcrawler itself. Vaguely cylindrical in shape, with a pair of deadly-looking turret-mounted cannons on its dorsal side. It was just pulling up. Those fools on the ground can't even see it, she thought.

Time was running out. She ducked out of the bridge, moving to one of the access crawl-tubes that crisscrossed the interior of the crawler.

* * *

"Ten twenty-three reporting. They're not in the repair bay, sir."

The stormtrooper spoke into his comlink, while Mace squeezed himself tighter into the corner. He was obviously green, Mace reasoned, since he didn't even take any of the great bits littering the bay. The trooper left, and Mace emerged. He looked at the R5 unit he had claimed, again wondering how the trooper could leave such a fine specimen behind. He would never understand Imperials.

Mace was halfway through loading the power droid onto the speeder when a clank behind him caught his ear. Maybe the trooper had returned. He grabbed a pair of arms off the nearest WED 15 unit, and stood perfectly still.

"Mace, nice try. Do you do any celebrity impressions?" Aguilae snickered, pulling herself out of the covered crawltube opening. Without her transliterator, she knew Mace wouldn't understand her, even more so than usual.

"Aggy!" Mace shouted, running to give the Jawa an embrace. With the robot arms still in hand, Mace succeeded in wrapping the hug around her twice. "Aggy, there's Imperials-type-trooper-guys right here in crawler-ship-thing!"

"We've got to get out of here before--" A sudden shriek of stressed metal cut her off. There was a horrible shudder, and the room began vibrating, resonating through all the little loose pieces of droid anatomy in the chamber.

"We're moving. Odd, what with the stormtroopers--" she was cut off again, this time by the squeal of a blaster bolt, then a sudden roar of an explosion.

"Mace ... we ... go now!" Aguilae croaked in Basic. She looked at the steam vent piping that lined the chamber, and hoped that the Imperial sensors weren't looking too closely at the chamber to notice the sudden flare of a repulsor signature. That they didn't even touch the speeder struck her as odd. What did they want in the first place?

"Coming, Aggy." Mace crouched next to the main servo of the door-gate for the chamber. Fastened to the servo with syntherope, bonding gel, and what looked like the rubber tread from a LIN droid, was a cluster of vac-tubes, power cells, liquid vials, and wiring. "You've been busy," she commented.

Mace struck a small flamer he kept tucked away in a hidden pocket, and lit an oily rag-wick. He jumped into the speeder, and covered his head.

There was a sharp crack as Mace's impromptu bomb turned into a thousand sparking filaments, and the servo split in two. With a heavy creak, the ramp lowered. Halfway.

"Crit..." Aguilae cursed. Three more blasts rocked the crawler, and the treads began making a staccato wailing that did not sound at all well.

"Hang on," yelled Mace, pulling on his goggles.

"Wait, Mace..." But there was no waiting. Mace gunned the engines. With the added weight of the two droids in the back seat, the speeder tilted back enough to make the 45-degree steep angle of the ramp. The top thruster barely cleared the doorway.

For a few exhilarating seconds, the speeder was airborne. Whatever forces that controlled time and space seemed to find these two scavengers entertaining at the very least. They weren't decapitated by their exit. Nor did

the speeder shatter when it returned to the ground, though for a few terrifying moments it sounded as if it was going to.

But, most amazing was their direction. The troopers were attacking from the northwest, and the speeder's chamber was oriented to face the southeast. With an entire burning crawler between them and the fleeing speeder, the Imperials would be hard pressed to have detected Mace and Aguilae.

Mace was at full throttle, despite the warning buzz of the speeder's thermostat. The sound of blaster fire was gradually fading away under the roar of the repulsor, and the crawler was growing to just a speck on the horizon, billowing thick, oily smoke into the clear sky.

Aguilae looked back, knowing that Jek and his tribe were gone. All that, for nothing. She had survived, though, and she wasn't taken home. That was all that mattered, but the droid was gone. She snorted an ironic laugh. She didn't even know if Jek had the droid to begin with.

The R5 and the power droid warbled fragments of conversation to each other in the awkward silence that accompanied most of the journey. Mace may not have known much, but he did recognize when Aguilae wanted to be left alone. At least, most of the time.

"Oh, hey, Aggy, you know what the R5 told me? He said the koovy white-type standing-upright droid we're looking for wandered away from the crawler before they even left the city."

The speeder's thrusters were momentarily drowned out by the loudest curse Aguilae had ever uttered.

* * *

Unut Poll took the small receipt chit the Jenet had given him and gave a quick visual inspection of the scooter he had returned. Everything seemed to be in order, save from some extra syntherope that the renter had left on the cargo cowling, but the credit was good, and that's all that mattered.

"Doing a little hunting?" Unut asked, painfully conversational.

"No," the Jenet replied, not looking up from the datapad he was tapping, updating expenditures to Mcgrrrr's account. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason." Ordinarily, those smart enough to survive on Mos Eisley's streets knew better than to ask questions, but the Jenet looked harmless enough. "I was just wondering about the rope, that's all."

"The rope is there to hold the droid down," the Jenet responded. "Are there no sub-adult schools on Cona?"

"Mister, in my school, they taught us the difference between a droid and empty desert air," said Unut, crossing his arms.

To this, the Jenet's ears perked up, although no one could have seen them for the borg implant. He looked back at the speeder. And there, in the shadow of Unut's stall, was his scooter, trailing some torn and frayed syntherope from its cowling.

The borg implant quickly provided the Jenet with over three hundred thousand expletives appropriate for the situation. Instead, he inhaled, willed his pores to radiate dignity, and said, "Excuse me."

As the Jenet turned and left, Unut could not help but laugh. This was definitely one to tell his staff.

"Hey, Wioslea, you'll never guess -- What's this?" Unut paused midstep, his glittering eyes spotting an oxidized, sand-pitted X-34 tri-thrust speeder parked in his lot.

His clerk, a tall comic-faced Vuvrian, looked up nervously. "We just bought it, from a moisture farmboy." She rubbed her oddly shaped hands, and stared at the clunker for a moment.

"How much?" Unut rumbled.

"Two thousand." Wioslea barely squeaked.

"Two thousand! What, is your brain baked? What are you, entering your second grubhood?"

* * *

Takeel positively beamed. He did it. He found the droid. He knew he could. He looked around, hoping his brother would notice. He -- wait, the droid.

An ice-cold second of sheer panic on a hot desert world melted away as Takeel saw the droid wandering about 15 meters behind him.

"I said follow me," he bellowed. "How dumb can you be?"

The humanoid business droid continued its buzzing, and shuffled along awkward legs, barely avoiding passersby.

"Will you hurry it up, I gotta get you to Jabba's," the Snivvian urged.

But if the droid had any care as to who Jabba was, and how important it was to rush to him at this moment, it made no indication. It continued its buzzing and shuffling.

"Why Jabba wants you I don't know," said Takeel, getting behind the droid in an attempt to steer it in the right direction. "You're so stupid."

* * *

The speeder had broken down three blocks from the shop, and Jek's Jawas had taken Aguilae's rental chit from her. It was, without question, the worst day she had ever had.

And now, appropriately, she was helping Mace shepherd two droids through the bustling alleyways so that no one would steal them.

Isn't that, she mused, how this all started?

"Come on, cheer up, Aggy!" Mace insisted, allowing his exuberance to cover the fact that he was skimping on his share of the lifting of the damaged R5. "We got these koovy droids, and a story to tell too!"

"Swell, a story. That'll put dinner on our tables and nikta in your liver," she snarled, knowing full well Mace couldn't understand her. She was out a transliterator, out a transponder coupler, she hadn't found the parts for Unut's Starhawk, and she was sure the Arcona was going to charge them for towing the speeder the three blocks. And, to top it all off, there was no trace of the business droid anywhere.

Until three seconds later.

"Mace! Mace! Nekkel juuuar obwegadada! Dinkle obwegadada!" She shouted, gesticulating madly.

"I said I was sorry, Aggy, it's--" Then Mace saw what she was pointing at. There, not 20 meters away, in a shadowy space between two buildings, was the droid, a Snivvian, and a Jenet holding a blaster.

"I'm afraid that this is my property," the Jenet said, emphasizing the point by slowly waving his blaster.

The hunchbacked Snivvian had drawn his own weapon, a laughable anachronism of polished metal. "No way, grubber, you don't know what I went through to get this thing."

A small part of the Jenet dating back to before the borg surgery screamed internally. "I'm sure it's very interesting, but you see, the droid is my property."

"Oh yeah, I don't see your name on it," snapped Takeel.

"First of all, you don't know my name. Secondly, I doubt you can even read. Thirdly, if you'll look closely on the droid's ventral hatch, there is a restraining bolt bearing the signet of Opun `The Black Hole' Mcgrrrr, the owner of this droid." The Jenet said, with surprisingly clear enunciation through clenched teeth.

Suddenly, a bright red blaster bolt tore from the crowd, striking the droid square on its back, sending its charred limbs hurling in several direction.

The two spun, facing the crowd. But the Jenet's sheer shock and rage over the destruction caused him to delay long enough for his own blaster to be knocked out of his hand by a well-placed second shot.

"That was all Jabba needed, borg" a voice called out from the now still crowd. Another Snivvian, this one in a sharp red jumpsuit, walked out carrying a smoking blaster. An unlikely form, he walked through the parting onlookers. He stood about 1.4 meters tall, and looked remarkably similar to Takeel.

"Brother!" exclaimed Takeel, nearly forgetting the situation entirely. "You shot my droid."

"You fool!" fumed the Jenet, "Have you any idea what you've just done?"

"Yes. I've gathered some rather incriminating evidence about your employer for my employer." The Snivvian, known to some as Snaggletooth, pulled out a datapad from his belt. He displayed it so the Jenet could see, all the while keeping his blaster trained on him. Its small screen showed a grainy holo image, with time-code counter ticking away at the bottom. The first scene was very dim, and showed a fat, slobbish man and his Jenet attendant sneaking around what appeared to be Jabba's townhouse. The image skipped for a bit, and the time-codes showed a significant advancement. There, in the brightly sunlit streets, was the Jenet, producing a labeled restraining bolt, and moving out of the camera's view. Then the image skipped again, and replayed the images just prior to the droid's demise.

From the skewed angles and wobbly picture, a borg implant wasn't required to surmise that the droid's photoreceptors had been recording the images.

"So, that's why it was so vacant," the Jenet muttered. "The droid's capacities were stretched running whatever transceiver rig the Hutt patched into it."

"Very good." Snaggletooth said, "Jabba has all sorts of holos of Mcgrrrr now. Stealing a business droid? From your host, even! Such bad form. Not to mention what sorts of secrets you let spill in the two days you had the droid."

"One and a half, really." The Jenet sniffed. He looked down his muzzle at the scruffier of the two Snivvians. "Tell me, what role did he have to play?"

"Purely accessory," Snaggletooth added. "Very good, brother. You found your first real bounty. Looks like Ephant Mon won the bet. I wonder what Jabba has to pay."

Takeel had missed everything said after "Very good" and relished the praise of his brother.

"Tell your employer to be at Jabba's palace by 2300, and tell him not to try anything stupid. His ship is impounded, and he's not going anywhere."
Snaggletooth lowered his blaster, then turned to his brother.

"And I believe these are yours," he said, giving his brother a handful of small centimeter-gauge metal sphere ammunition.

* * *

Mace hadn't gotten it, the whole situation they'd witnessed, and Aguilae was certain she couldn't explain it to him even if she had the transliterator. The point was, if the suns shined on them through good skies, then Jabba would ignore the second theft of his business droid by Mace.

And if not, well, they'd deal with that when it came.

They managed to salvage what was left of the droid, knowing that since it had transmitted all of its holo information to Jabba or Snaggletooth, no one would need the charred remains. Maybe they could sell it to someone, or maybe some other Jawas would come in from the swap.

She wouldn't mention Jek to them. He and his tribe deserved that much. Let their scraps be found by those scrounging; she would not tip off anyone to its location. She and Mace had taken their share. The CZ's motivator looked like it would fit in the R5, and the power droid seemed fine.

A few years back, she would have picked the sandcrawler remains clear. But not now. That was too much of the Jawa way, and she had chosen this life. And she was going to stick it through. Someday, she was going to make a fortune.

During This Time of Crisis ...

(A holomessage to the citizens of the Galactic Empire from Ars Dangor, advisor to the Emperor.)

Loyal subjects,

These are dangerous times. Our grand Empire of united star systems now faces a threat that could destroy us if action is not taken quickly.

As always, we shall act quickly.

The rebellion against the Emperor's fair and just rule has flared into a flame greater than we anticipate'd. It threatens to become a civil war, and as such we have declared it an emergency situation.

To better protect our citizens and our member worlds, the Emperor has superseded and suspended the Imperial Senate for the duration of this emergency. The Moffs and Grand Moffs will now have direct control of their systems until such time as the danger has passed.

We are sure you shall all do everything in your power to assist us during this time of crisis.

Your servant,

Ars Dangor, Imperial Advisor

35:3:5/CDN/G76D/COR.1.IPC/POL

Imperial Senate Suspended

Imperial City, Coruscant

Citing rising Rebel insurrection that recently erupted on Ralltiir, Gerrard V, and numerous other worlds, Emperor Palpatine has suspended the Imperial Senate until the Rebel threat has been dealt with. For the time being, he says, regional governors and Moffs will have direct control of their sectors, to better eradicate the Rebel virus.

Senators, even those supportive of the Emperor, were outraged to discover themselves locked out of their offices and chambers this morning, but they have no alternative under the Imperial charter but to comply with the edict. Some Senators attempted to gain access to Palpatine directly, but were told by a Palace aide that their diplomatic access to the Palace had been suspended for the duration of the emergency.

Many looked to Senator Canna Omonda, Chandrila's representative since Mon Mothma's sudden but memorable resignation several years ago, to intercede on their behalf before the Emperor, but she made no effort to gain an audience. "I am gratified to see that my esteemed colleagues are coming, however late, to the realization that talk is not a suitable means of communicating with Palpatine," she snidely remarked before boarding a transport bound for Chandrila. Most, like Omonda, are leaving Coruscant for their homeworlds, though several key allies of the Emperor are staying on in various new capacities.

Coruscant Daily NewsFeed

WAR ON THE JUNDLAND WASTES

WRITER MIKE W. BARR ARTIST & COLOURIST BOB MOLESWORTH LETTERER GABRIELA HOUSTON

"I WANT TO COME WITH YOU TO ALDERAAN. THERE'S NOTHING FOR ME HERE NOW. I WANT TO LEARN THE WAYS OF THE FORCE AND BE A JEDI, LIKE MY FATHER."

LUKE SKYWALKER HAS CHOSEN HIS PATH, WITH BEN KENOBI AS HIS GUIDE. THIS IS HIS FIRST STEP ALONG THE WAY.

IT'S NOT MUCH FARTHER TO MOS EISLEY, BEN!

GOOD! ONCE WE'VE SECURED TRANSPORT TO ALDERAAN, WE CAN BEGIN YOUR TRAINING IN THE FORCE!

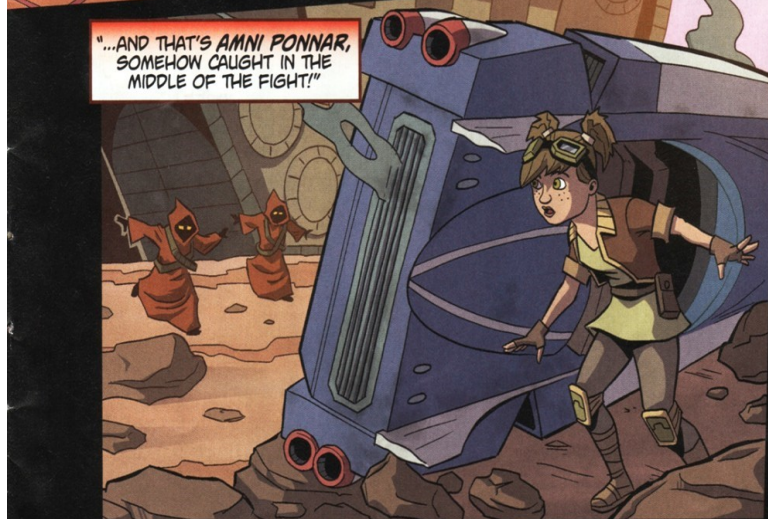
I PROMISE YOU BEN, I'LL DO BETTER THAN YOUR LAST APPRENTICE - THE ONE WHO BETRAYED YOU AND MY FATHER AND BECAME DARTH VADER!

DON'T WORRY, LUKE, I'M SURE YOU'LL BE NOTHING LIKE HIM!

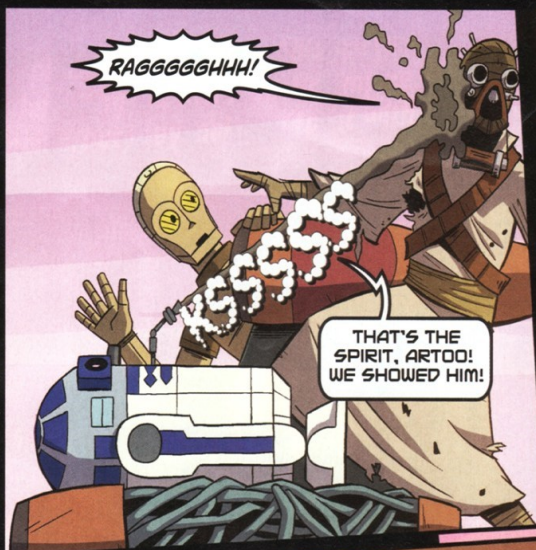
EEEEEEK!

VADA-BLOOT! WHEET?

OF COURSE I HEARD THAT, YOU OVER-GREASED SPROCKET! MY AUDIO RECEPTORS ARE QUITE KEEN, YOU KNOW!





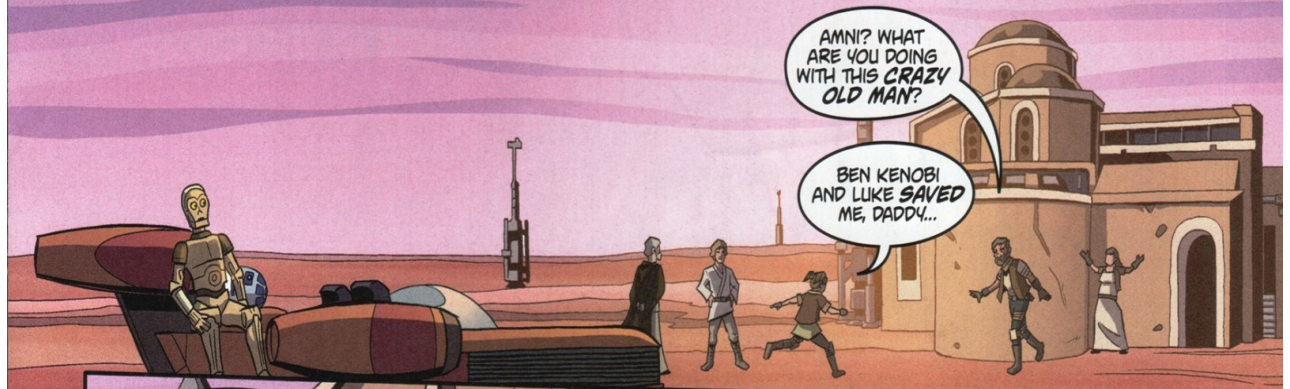


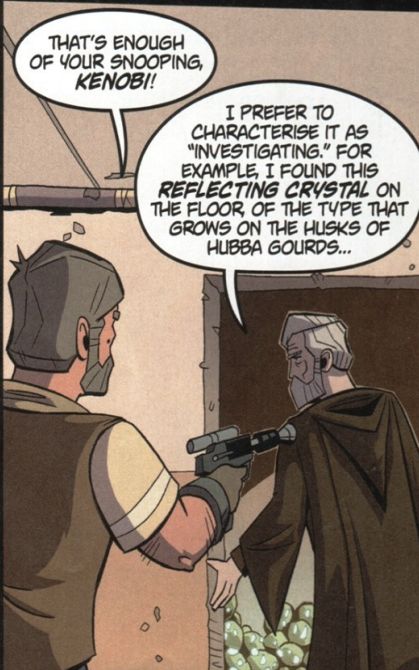
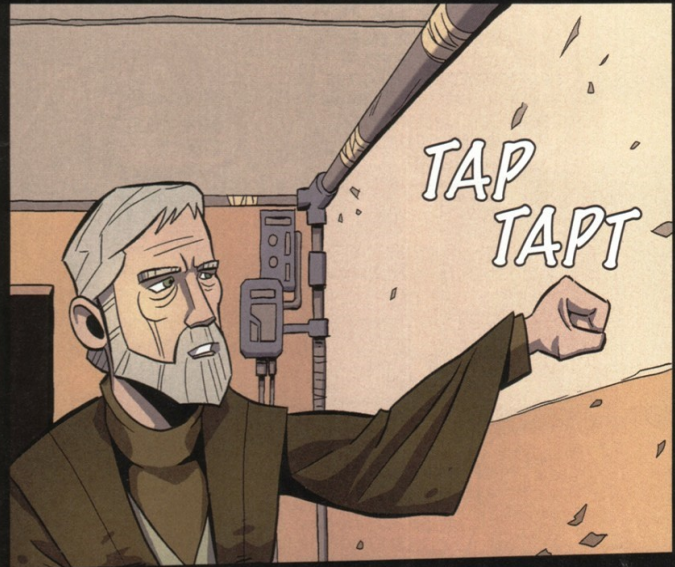
GET US AWAY FROM HERE, LUKE!

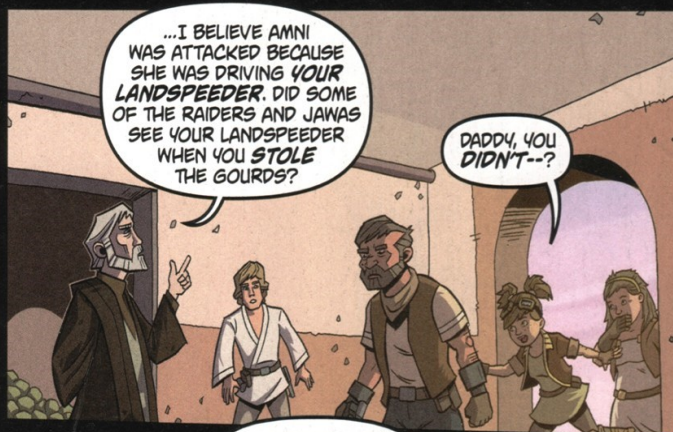
YOU DON'T HAVE TO TELL ME TWICE, BEN!

Continued on page 22

AND SOON...

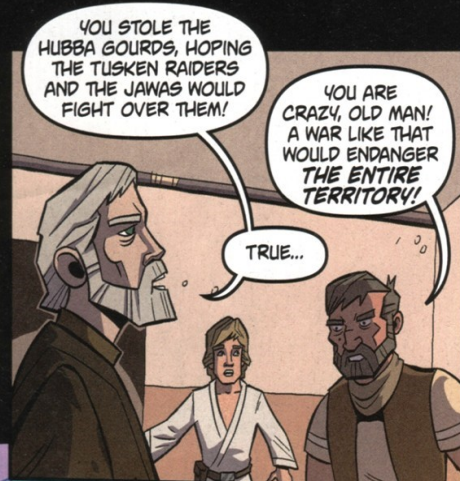






...I BELIEVE AMNI WAS ATTACKED BECAUSE SHE WAS DRIVING **YOUR LANDSPEEDER**. DID SOME OF THE RAIDERS AND JAWAS SEE YOUR LANDSPEEDER WHEN YOU **STOLE** THE GOURDS?

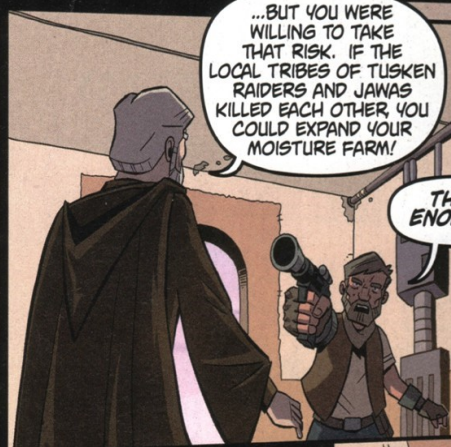
DADDY, YOU DIDN'T--?



YOU STOLE THE HUBBA GOURDS, HOPING THE TUSKEN RAIDERS AND THE JAWAS WOULD FIGHT OVER THEM!

YOU ARE CRAZY, OLD MAN! A WAR LIKE THAT WOULD ENDANGER THE ENTIRE TERRITORY!!

TRUE...



...BUT YOU WERE WILLING TO TAKE THAT RISK. IF THE LOCAL TRIBES OF TUSKEN RAIDERS AND JAWAS KILLED EACH OTHER, YOU COULD EXPAND YOUR MOISTURE FARM!

THAT'S ENOUGH--!



THAT'S THE FIRST THING YOU'VE SAID I AGREE WITH!



OH...SORRY, MRS PONNAR!

THE POWER OF A LIGHTSABER IS TO BE USED **CAREFULLY**, LUKE -- ESPECIALLY IN THE HANDS OF A NOVICE.



BEN -- THEY FOLLOWED US HERE...THEY'RE ATTACKING!



WE CAN'T
TAKE THEM
ALL--!

THERE ARE
OTHER WEAPONS
BESIDES BLASTERS
AND LIGHTSABERS,
LUKE...



...SUCH AS
HUNGER. THE
GOURDS WILL
EXPLOIT THAT
NICELY...



"...ONCE THEIR STOMACHS
ARE FULL, THEY'LL FORGET
ALL ABOUT THE PONNARS --
AND THEIR FEUD!"

RAHGGG!

GRAWWWWK!



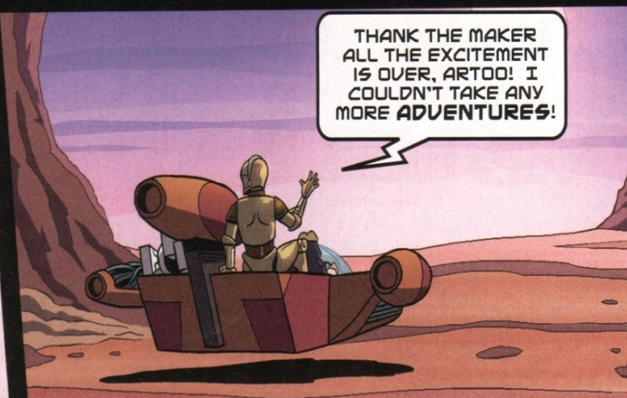
BEN, THE WAY
YOU HANDLED THAT
SITUATION...I DON'T
SEE HOW I CAN EVER
BECOME A JEDI
KNIGHT!

FIRST YOU
MUST KNOW THE
FORCE, LUKE -- THEN
EVERYTHING WILL FALL
INTO PLACE.

I WISH WE
COULD HAVE TURNED
PONNAR OVER TO THE
AUTHORITIES...



"DID YOU SEE THE SCORN ON
THE FACES OF HIS WIFE AND
DAUGHTER, LUKE? I THINK THAT
WILL BE PUNISHMENT ENOUGH!"



THANK THE MAKER
ALL THE EXCITEMENT
IS OVER, ARTOO! I
COULDN'T TAKE ANY
MORE ADVENTURES!

END!

Cantina Communications

Mos Eisley is a frontier town and the seedy bar room was crowded with creatures from other planets -- traders, dealers, freelance space crew looking for a job, confidence tricksters and the outlaws from a dozen worlds. Somehow Ben Kenobi and Luke Skywalker had to find a pilot who would take them on their desperate mission. His old tutor plunged into the crowd and Luke was left on his own, wondering at the extraordinary variety of life-forms around him. What were they thinking? What strange skills did they possess? Above all, which of them could they trust?

The universe had already revealed some bizarre forms of life, and more were discovered every year. Travelers returning from the remote parts of the galaxy even spoke of giant clouds of gas, drifting in outer space, which had evolved intelligence of a sort based on internal force-fields. As a rule, the bigger and more complex the brain, the higher the intelligence, but most of the superbrains were too large to move around independently and kept very much to themselves. Luke had seen pictures of some of them, like the giant algae-beds in the Cygnus B system and, perhaps the strangest of all, the "thinking" ocean which covered the planet Solanus. This was a sea so rich in chemicals it could carry out billions of thought processes in its murky depths, yet it refused to take part in galactic affairs and spent its time playing with itself, making and reforming elaborate crystal structures and brooding on its own identity.

But that, as Han Solo would say, is another world. Here on Tatooine, Luke was faced with a familiar range of biology. However strange their outward appearance at least they walked and talked.

Although the bar was noisy, Luke realized that not all the conversation was audible. At higher frequencies than he could hear, there was an ultrasonic cacophony of squeaks and whistles. Klytonians were talking to each other across the room by vibrations in the electric fields generated from the leathery scales which covered their bodies. Telepaths bent their heads together in corners, trying to shut out the babble of brainwaves around them and olfaxes

sniffed the air, conversing in what was probably the most sophisticated language of all -- the language of smell.

A human being has five million sensory cells responding to smell signals, and a dog -- which is one of the best earthly olfaxes -- has 150 million. But on some of the dark planets, a long way from the nearest star or covered with dense clouds, olfaxes have evolved which had half their brain devoted to smell.

Using three different types of nerves in the same way that humans have three different light receptors in their eyes, they could "smell" in color and 3-D. With their eyes closed they could tell you not only who was in the bar, but where they were standing. There was no way to hide from an olfax and Imperial stormtroopers seldom got the drop on them because their sensitive noses detected them long before they were visible. It was impossible to lie to them because their smell conveyed the true meaning behind your words. An olfax could smell anxiety or fear or trust as easily as a human can smell fresh baked bread.

Luke used to wonder how the olfaxes, with their poor eyesight, ever discovered the rest of the galaxy, until old Ben Kenobi pointed out that many forms of radiation produce smells. Ultra-violet light, for instance, turns oxygen into ozone and it was the distinctive aroma of this that gave the olfaxes their first clue to the universe.

"Mind you," the old man had added, "they are hopeless at space flight. Their chemical computers are slow compared to ours and you can't smell anything in a vacuum."

"Which species make the best pilots?" Luke had asked, and to his surprise Ben had taken down his battered copy of the *Universal Encyclopedia* and opened it at a picture of an insect-like creature with huge multiple eyes.

"These," he said. "I still need computers, but these can do the calculations in their heads. Look at their eyes with all those facets. Their brains have evolved to coordinate all those image automatically. They think mathematics. Trajectories and orbits come naturally to them and they are the best astral navigators I have ever come across. They have a flicker-fusion rate of over three hundred!"

"What does that mean?" asked Luke.

"It's the speed at which they can take in information. If you look at more than 20 pictures a second they run together like a film, but you could show these creatures 300 pictures a second and they would still see each one as a separate still image. That's how fast they are!"

* * *

Luke remembered Ben Kenobi's words as he looked around the bar. What was that phrase the old warrior had used? "Never mind what they look like. It's how they think that matters." But what were they thinking, these bio-electrics, telepaths, olfaxes, and heat-sensitives whose world was a rainbow of different temperatures and ultrasonics who saw right through time? Not for the first time, he was glad that Kenobi -- and the Force -- was with him.



IN THE INSTANT WHEN THE BULKY MONSTER'S ATTENTION WAS OFF HIM, THE OLD MAN'S HAND HAD MOVED TO THE OBJECT SLUNG AT HIS SIDE.



BEN'S FINAL MOVEMENT BROKE THE TOTAL QUIET THAT HAD ENSHROUDED THE ROOM. LUKE BARELY HEARD THE RENEWED CONVERSATION. HE WAS STILL SHAKEN BY THE SPEED OF THE FIGHT AND BY THE OLD MAN'S UNIMAGINED ABILITIES.



Force Commander

Desert Training

While searching Anchorhead, Brenn Tantor learns that the droids (C-3PO and R2-D2) have escaped Tatooine (aboard the Millennium Falcon). Using the Falcon's course trajectory as a guide, the Imperials determine that they must be heading for Alderaan or Ruul. Brenn is promoted to Captain and sent with Captain Beri Tulon to Ruul to continue the pursuit . . .

Droid Trouble

For years, Tereb Ab'Lon had carefully planned and manipulated his rise to power, swearing to one day hold the title of Imperial Senator. That dream was shattered the day the Emperor dissolved the Imperial Senate.

As Ab'Lon looked about the Bothan Embassy, his gaze finally resting on his immediate superior, the Bothan Ambassador to the Empire, Gatrar Shey'Tyan, the taste of rebellion whet his appetite. He watched as the ambassador helplessly submitted the Bothan people to the rule of a dictator, yet a slight smile managed to touch his fanged maw.

The Empire would not, could not, last forever. With a little luck and a lot of planning, he hoped to help bring about an early demise and secure himself a position in the government that would rise from its ashes. A position with real power, where his name would be known to all, and the destinies of entire worlds would rest on his decisions.

The council room had all but emptied when Ab'Lon's attention returned to matters at hand. As the aide to the Bothan Ambassador, his tasks included keeping an eye on opponents' strategies and political tactics aimed at discrediting Shey'Tyan and his position. A task Ab'Lon thoroughly despised, as he constantly attempted to cause Shey'Tyan's fall to assume his position, thus increasing his own power.

But no longer, he thought to himself. After Ab'Lon secretly joined the Rebellion, Shey'Tyan's fall from power meant nothing. His goal was now the

total collapse of the Empire. A goal that was to begin with the Imperial Navy operation plans he silently dropped into his astromech droid's memory banks two days ago.

Shey'Tyan started toward him, his regal attire flowing behind as he moved. Ab'Lon watched him approach and tried to hide the satisfaction he felt in himself. Tomorrow he would meet with a Rebel agent and turn the plans over to the Alliance, the first step in his eventual rise to power. But today, modesty and humility in the face of his superior were the key to ensuring tomorrow's successes.

* * *

Blaster bolts exploded outside the cockpit of the stolen Bothawui shuttle. Ab'Lon pulled it into a tight barrel roll and readjusted the trajectory to match his escape course.

"Get those hyperspace coordinates set," Ab'Lon growled as he completed the maneuver. "I'm a diplomat, I can't dodge trained TIE pilots forever." The faint cries of his astromech droid, followed by the usual fwweep, echoed through the cockpit.

Another volley of blaster fire erupted about the craft as Ab'Lon dropped it into an extreme dive. The fur around his neck rippled in panic as he stared helplessly at the deflector shield display indicating failure. The momentum from the dive had pushed him down into the pilot's seat, restricting his movement until the lagging drive compensators kicked in.

He knew that an Ambassador-class shuttle was not designed to take this kind of punishment. Of course, he wasn't trained to battle a line of TIEs and a Victory-class Star Destroyer either. With a little luck, they might both pull out unscathed.

Ab'Lon glanced at the sensor display quickly. The Star Destroyer was cresting Bothawui Proper, but it had yet to break orbit and pursue. Why should it, Ab'Lon thought to himself - - without a gunner he couldn't put up a fight. The patrolling TIEs were more than enough to blow him out of the sky.

The TIEs released another barrage that rocked the shuttle. Ab'Lon tried to pull out of the dive into a hard port double turn. Blue lightning played off the

control panels as several direct hits took out the shields and ionized the controls all at once. He lost control and began to spin, colliding with one of his pursuers.

The rear-end collision left both ships with minor damage, but even as the TIE spun away, Ab'Lon could feel the shuttle slowing. A quick scan of the drive display, which was just now coming back online, revealed the problem. One of the coolant lines to the main sublight drive had been severed, causing an automatic drive shutdown.

Ab'Lon's pointed ears dropped and his fur rippled in a quick wave down his neck. "Is the hyperdrive down as well?" he called as he hurriedly scanned the control displays for anything that might help him out of this situation.

After a short pause, a decisively negative series of warbles, clicks, and whistles - - followed by a fweep - - came from the droid at the nav computer console over his left shoulder.

Quickly, Ab'Lon checked the sensors. The TIEs had banked around and were coming up fast, but the Star Destroyer had only just begun to pursue. The shuttle was still a good 30 seconds out of tractor beam range.

"Unidentified shuttle, this is the Star Destroyer Temerit," the voice blistered with pride as it flowed through the comm. "You are ordered to surrender immediately." There was no mistaking the unspoken intent behind those cold, mechanical words should he try anything else.

"Are the coordinates set yet?" he called out expectantly. The shuttle might be dead in space, he thought, but the hyperdrive was still functional. If he could just make the jump to hyperspace before the Temerit could lock its tractor beam...

An affirmative whistle, followed by a fweep, was precisely what he had been waiting for. A slight smile touched his lips. "Hold on," he called back to the little droid. "I'm going to make the jump."

The warbles of protest, followed by a low moan and a series of panicked fweeps, went completely unheeded. Ab'Lon made the ancient Bothan gesture of good hope, and pulled the hyperdrive lever.

* * *

Nim Bola made a left out of the Mos Eisley Cantina and walked past the small crowd gathered outside. He could see a Barabel's head standing a half-meter above the rest of the group and knew that his Rodian partner had to be nearby. There was no doubt that they were going to covertly attempt to follow Bola, but there was no reason to let them know. He casually moved past the community junkpile and started for his office.

In one graceful movement, Bola pushed a wind-blown golden lock of hair out of his face and switched on the small comlink attached to his collar. "You were right," he whispered into the comlink, "it's a double-cross." He casually waved away a couple of Jawas from a nearby droid lot. "I'll take them through the alley opposite the hotel's west side," he whispered, glancing over his shoulder and picking up speed. "Be ready for them there."

He pulled his timeworn gray jacket tight as the chilling night breeze kicked up. "Cold, dark, and deserted," he muttered to himself as his strides steadily increased. "Perfect time for an ambush, especially when you're not the one being ambushed." A smile touched his lips as he started to jog for the alley, taking a quick glance behind. At that moment, the two bounty hunters broke into a dead run, straight toward him. C'mon, he thought to himself, come and get me.

* * *

The familiar starlines flowed into the mottled sky of hyperspace and a slight smile crossed Ab'Lon's features, an expression that more resembled a snarl than a smile.

"Fweep, calculate and set coordinates to make a second jump from the Piroket to the Tao-Grant system," he said, the relief of escape filling his lungs with every breath. "There's an established Alliance cell on the second moon of the system's lone gas giant." Ab'Lon glanced around the cockpit of the stolen shuttle and frowned, the fur about his face stood on end and his nose twitched nervously. "I don't want the Empire to be able to track us," he said thoughtfully. In his 12 years in politics, he had seen far too many Bothan leaders relax their guard and make mistakes, only to lose their position and often their lives. "Set coordinates for two short jumps after Piroket, away from Tao-Grant, then a third to it."

An affirmative whistle and a fwweep flowed through the cockpit. Ab'Lon couldn't help but allow a hearty smile, a fearful fanged expression that seemed better suited to convey horror than happiness. The little Artoo unit, nicknamed Artoo-ZeeOne, known also as Fwweep, didn't even realize he made the noise. Six Imperial technicians and innumerable Bothan droid repair techs had tried, unsuccessfully, to repair that malfunction. The task was finally abandoned and the "fwweep" sound listed as a design flaw.

Ab'Lon had acquired the little droid just before it was to be shipped off and dismantled. As a Bothan, he could see the obvious advantages of having a personal droid that almost everyone found annoying, especially the Empire, with its prim and proper devotion to perfection. Later he discovered the droid to be persistently loyal and remarkably easy to keep track of.

Fwweep proved to be invaluable after Ab'Lon secretly joined the Rebel Alliance. His position as top aide to the Bothan Ambassador to the Empire had given him access to certain Imperial Intelligence files that he could quietly drop into the little droid's memory system, securing it for later transmissions.

For nearly two years he'd been sending useful information to the Rebels, but nothing more. Often he'd skip over the more vital operations he'd seen - - the fear of being caught in a situation that might cost him his office and his life was more powerful than his loyalty to the Alliance. Then three days ago, he got a glance at an Imperial Navy operations schedule.

At last, Ab'Lon had a chance to supply the Alliance with a vital bit of information, but it was risky at best. This type of information always had safeguards and alarms to keep anyone from doing what he was attempting, and his skills at bypassing security codes weren't nearly as good as his ability to dodge TIE fighters. Still, it was an opportunity he couldn't let pass.

At least that was his mindset until this morning, when a Star Destroyer escorting an Imperial dungeon ship arrived in orbit. Both craft immediately began landing drop ships and shuttles and launching patrol ships. In a matter of minutes the Empire controlled Lktim, one of Bothawui's largest cities. Determined not to be taken captive, Ab'Lon set his planned and practiced escape into motion. That's when he ran into the patrolling TIE fighters.

Looking back on it, he wondered if it wasn't paranoia and poor timing that got him into this situation. After all, he thought, there had been political prisoners awaiting transport on the planet. Anyway, Fweep still carried the plans and although the rendezvous was forgotten, he could still complete the mission by hand-delivering the plans. He wondered how he'd be received by the Alliance.

A faint gurgling noise, followed by a series of beeps and whistles, ending with a fweep, brought Ab'Lon back to reality. "Hold on," he growled as he unlatched the restraints and pulled himself out of the seat. "I'm on my way."

He passed through the cockpit door into the lavishly decorated recreational chamber, and turned toward the maintenance area. Fweep had somehow managed to work his way into the lower level maintenance hatch and was already assessing the damage when Ab'Lon arrived.

"How bad is it?" he asked tentatively, poking his head into the open hatch. A nauseating blue-black vapor worked its way into his nose, causing him to jerk his head back in a half growl, half cough.

Fweep gurgled, beeped, and whistled for an annoyingly long time before his final fweep. Though Ab'Lon couldn't follow much of the technical jargon, the basic problem was clear. The sublight drive was damaged beyond their ability to repair, and some of the command pathways between the hyperdrive system and the nav computer had been damaged during the battle.

"So basically what you're saying," Ab'Lon started, the fur along his neck standing on end, "is that we might not be going to Piroket. And to make things worse, if we get there we're not going to have a sublight drive to maneuver."

The droid beeped affirmatively, followed by a low fweep. Silence hung in the air as Ab'Lon sat, staring at the mess of wires, pipes, and cylinders, looking for any way out of this deplorable situation. He silently cursed the Empire and their TIE pilots.

* * *

A low moan, followed by a fweep, ended Ab'Lon's last hope of repairing the drive system. They had worked for nearly three hours on craft schematics and experimental hyperdrive logs looking for any conceivable method of jury-

rigging the system and bringing the sublight drive back online. They could do it, but not without overloading the drive generator, dismantling the hyperdrive, and getting outside the craft. All of which meant the task was hopeless.

Even if he could get the drive system on line, where could he stop off for repairs in a stolen Ambassador-class shuttle? The Empire would surely have scouts searching for him throughout the galaxy by now; the Rebel base on Tao-Grant was his only hope.

Ab'Lon's pointed ears began to twitch and the fur along the back of his neck rippled erratically. With a snarl and a low rumbling from deep in his throat, he began to pace. Fweep watched him quietly pacing into the recreational chamber and back to the maintenance hatch, the little droid's silver and gray dome swiveling with his master's every move.

The nav computer signaled 10 minutes to the Piroket system. Silently, trying to suppress his frustration and building rage, Ab'Lon helped the squabbling droid out of the maintenance hatch. He led Fweep over to the nav computer console and wedged him between it and two seats. The droid warbled, moaned, and fweeped, but Ab'Lon didn't seem to be paying much attention. He tapped the nav computer display switch several times before it went on-line.

"I don't know what we're going to do," he finally growled. "Let's just hope that we're going to Piroket," he said as he checked over the nav computer displays. Much of the control grid had blacked out since their initial jump and he had no way to calculate any coordinates other than those Fweep had entered.

"Three minutes to disengage," he said, more to himself than to Fweep, as he moved toward the pilot's seat. He stopped in mid-stride and looked back to the little droid. "Could you get us to Tao-Grant if we disengage the nav computer?" he asked doubtfully.

After about 30 seconds of silence, the little droid responded with a series of whistles that Ab'Lon could only translate as "maybe." "It's worth a try," he said as he sat down and reached for the safety harness. "As soon as we..."

Ab'Lon was slammed into the forward control panels as the shuttle jerked out of hyperspace. The sounds of smashing equipment and cracking bones

filled the cockpit. He was dumped to the floor in a semiconscious, broken mass.

Fweep let out a series of shrill cries, followed by a low moan and a short string of fweeps. Ab'Lon barely heard the little droid as he struggled to regain his feet, dimly aware of a severe pain in his chest and blood trickling into his eyes from his forehead. He slowly glanced out the cockpit to determine what the little droid was in such a fluster about. There, eclipsing the void of space, sat a planet.

His violet eyes widened and a cold chill ran up his spine, rippling the fur all the way up to his twitching pointed ears. The fog that clouded his mind quickly cleared and he leaped back into the pilot's seat, reaching for the damaged controls and ignoring the protests of his battered body.

Instinctively, he tried to pull the craft into an extreme climb. Then he remembered that the sublight drive was out. The craft rocked violently - - nearly throwing Ab'Lon to the floor of the cockpit again - - as it entered the planet's gravity well. Frantically, he reached for the maneuvering thruster controls, firing them in attempt to break free. There was no change in course as the shuttle hit the upper atmosphere, tossing the battered Bothan toward the back of the cockpit.

"Hang on," he cried as he tried to make his way back to the pilot's seat. "I think we're going to crash."

The shuttle streaked downward and Ab'Lon did his best to keep it from being scattered across this planet's desert terrain. "Are you all right back there?" he yelled over the shrieking alarms and flaring warning lights. The racket filled the cockpit and annoyed Ab'Lon.

The electronic snort followed by a low fweep successfully conveyed the little droid's impression of Ab'Lon's piloting skills. He was half-tempted to release the droid's safety restraints and let him bounce around the cockpit for a while, but the ground was approaching fast. Besides, he decided, Fweep could probably magnetically anchor himself in place. A trick he wished he could use to keep himself in the seat of this shuttle. He'd been thrown to the cockpit floor once too often - - the pain in his chest still stabbed like a vibroblade.

He fired the maneuvering thrusters again, hoping to bring the nose of the shuttle up and keep the impact from killing him. He made the gesture of good hope, realizing that several fingers on his right hand were broken when they wouldn't extend to the proper angles. As he braced for impact, he once more cursed the Empire for putting him into this situation.

* * *

The speeder raced across the desert terrain of the Dune Sea. Nim Bola, a man who never much cared for the company of Rodians, decided that this one smelled worse in the sun than in the dark confines of the cantina. The thought of returning to the rank atmosphere of the Pit of Carkoon didn't exactly make matters better, but there weren't many solitary places to permanently dispose of incriminating evidence. The Sarlacc was both.

Bola glanced at the two figures, piled one on top of the other in the speeder's only passenger seat, and a smile touched his worry-lined features. The ambush couldn't have gone any better. He'd lured them into the alley and Tavri dropped the Rodian with a single shot before the enemy could draw his weapon. The Barabel, on the other hand, took two blind shots at Tavri and turned to track Bola before three shots from the others' sporting blaster and two from Tavri's heavy blaster dropped him to the ground. The perfect payment for revenge.

They'd hired him to track an Ithorian who had been frequenting the cantina lately. The pay was too good and the job too easy. Looking back on it, he decided that it may have been a good idea to warn them of the Ithorian's pet meat eating plant, but then again, surprise is the spice of life.

Bola brought the speeder to a halt a good 15 meters above the pit, well out of range of those damned tentacles. He glanced down at the waiting pink maw, the odor about the thing made the Rodian smell good.

"Well," he said as he lifted the lighter of the two and dropped him over the edge of the speeder, "I hope you taste better than you smell." As he watched the Rodian roll down the pit into the Sarlacc's throat, he wondered just briefly what happened to its victims. Sure he'd heard rumors, but none had been conclusively proven. He shook the thought away, swearing to never find out firsthand.

The whistling sound of something headed toward him at high speed brought Bola back to reality. He gazed skyward, but whatever it was, was hidden in the light of the second sun. He hefted the Barabel over the edge of the speeder and dropped him into the pit. The heavier Barabel sank into the sand, but a thick tentacle shot from the Sarlacc's throat and quickly dragged him past the rings of fangs filling the maw, into the blackness beyond.

Bola balanced himself and looked skyward for a glance at the craft that was bearing down on him so quickly.

A sudden rush of air rocked the speeder as the craft hurled by, not more than 20 meters overhead. Bola was thrown out of the speeder. He reached out with his left hand and grabbed for the foot step. He caught himself and glanced down. Fear gripped him as he dangled over the Sarlacc by one arm. He pulled himself back into the craft.

He sat down, breathing heavy and shaken. For the next few moments, he tried to ease his breathing and lose the thought of falling into that disgusting pit of death. Silently, he swore he'd never get this close to that monstrosity again.

It wasn't until he heard the explosion that Bola realized the craft that buzzed him wasn't someone deliberately trying to kill him, or kids from Anchorhead messing around. He turned the speeder toward the smoke rising over the dunes and hit the accelerator, hoping that this wasn't another mistake.

* * *

The shuttle slammed into a sand dune, tearing the bulk of the lower starboard wing off, and thrusting Ab'Lon into unconsciousness for the duration of the crash. When he'd finally regained some of his senses, he could dimly hear a low moan, followed by a fweep from somewhere behind, accompanied by the soft crackling of electricity all around. An odd sense of vertigo made his fog enshrouded head spin, and he coughed violently as thick black smoke filled his lungs.

It wasn't until he opened his eyes that Ab'Lon realized the shuttle was lying on its side - - what was left of it anyway. The restraints pushed against his broken ribs and with every breath a new sensation of pain rippled through his battered body. Everything hurt.

He tried to release the restraints with the broken fingers of his right hand, while getting a firm grip on what was left of the weapons console with his left.

After about 30 seconds of fidgeting with the latch, it popped free. His grip on the console was instantly broken and he hit the starboard wall - - now the bottom of the cockpit - - with a thud. It took him a few minutes to get to his feet. He crumpled back to the floor several times in pain as he tried. He had a very difficult time breathing and his right arm had gone completely numb after the fall.

Several rays of daylight slipped through cracks in the hull, furnishing just enough light to assess the damage. Fweep was still strapped in, but one of the cockpit chairs had been dislodged and was lying on the floor in a mess of debris. The battered and dented little droid seemed to be on the verge of falling. He released a series of shrill fweeps as various electrical wires surged near his swiveling dome. Very little of the cockpit had escaped damage and there was no way Ab'Lon could get the little droid down without some assistance. He scanned the area for anything that might help.

The entry ramp was lying partially open and he decided that it might be his best chance. Slowly, he worked his way through the wreckage toward the sunlight streaming in. Part of him hoped and part of him feared that maybe someone saw the crash who might help him.

* * *

The wreckage was scattered across a 300-meter radius, but somehow the bulk of the craft remained in one piece. It was of alien design, but resembled an Ambassador-class shuttle Bola once saw while investigating a case on Coruscant a few years ago.

He drew his heavy blaster pistol from its holster and, working his way through searing shrapnel, moved toward the cracked-open entry ramp. He half expected a stormtrooper or two to leap out, but the sheer devastation of the ship quickly put those fears to rest. He was six meters away when something stumbled out of the shuttle and fell face first into the sand.

Bola edged up closer, half expecting a double-cross, but that was his nature and it was a difficult feeling to ignore, even in these circumstances. The back of

the creature's royal blue and gold vest was torn and scorched. Its back heaved, obviously gasping for air. Furry, taloned fingers clawed slowly, uselessly at the sand. The fur along the back of its neck stood on end, occasionally rippling in the hot desert breeze.

Placing his left boot under the creature's right shoulder, Bola cautiously turned it over. A low groan escaped its lips and its chest heaved in a series of choking coughs. The mottled, singed fur of the creature's face partially covered some nasty wounds. Its clothing was torn and hanging, revealing a disfigured, badly battered chest. A single piece of jewelry hung around its neck - - a silver pendant. It was partially blackened, but the workmanship was exquisite. Bola shuddered - - he wasn't even sure if a bacta tank could save this creature from death.

Slowly, the creature's eyes moved, at first fluttering, then finally opening. Bola peered down into the creature's wide, violet eyes, looking for any sign of life.

"You," the creature visibly gulped, starting the thought over. "You must help me... R2," it muttered between breaths. "Get the R2 unit," it sighed heavily, nearly losing consciousness.

"What R2 unit?" Bola asked, vaguely wondering how hard the creature had hit its head.

"In the..." it started, but was interrupted by an abrupt wail of clicks, whistles, and moans. Bola moved cautiously into the mangled craft, leaving the battered creature muttering something to itself. He climbed over the twisted metal of the cockpit, glancing at a growing fire in the hold, before peering in.

He wondered how anything could have survived the devastation that surrounded him. A quiet moan, followed by a fweep, surprised Bola and he turned, training his blaster on the noise. There, clinging to the cockpit floor, which now stood vertically, was an R2 unit. It was partially strapped to a swivel chair and wedged against a damaged computer console. Bola tried to stifle a smile, but the scene was just too comical.

"C'mon," Bola said with a hearty smile, "let me help you down from there. "

The droid moaned and fweeped throughout the process - - a process which taxed Bola's patience to the point where he was tempted to shut down the annoying little droid and leave it there. But after about five minutes it was quietly working its way out of the craft. Bola moved to the creature, still lying on its back in the sand, and felt for a pulse.

It opened its eyes and gazed up at him. "Take the droid," it started slowly, "to the Alliance." Its hand grasped Bola's shirt, and it pleaded, "Please."

Bola looked directly into the creature's eyes, and grasped the other's hand. "What's in it for me?" he asked coldly, throwing the creature's hand to the ground.

The creature bared its teeth, its ears pointed skyward, fur rippling along its neck. "What?" it growled.

"You heard me," Bola said, matching the other's gaze. "I am not taking that squabbling droid anywhere for nothing."

The creature's blown temper, combined with its injuries, must have been too much for its body to take. Unconsciousness doused the fire in its eyes, and Bola watched as the creature's body went limp.

Ab'Lon could feel the twin suns beating down on his aching body. A rush of hot desert air slammed into his face as his head rolled to the side. Most of his body had gone numb, and the parts he could feel rippled in waves of pain. A sense of movement, the quiet whine of an engine, and the arid desert wind slapping him in the face were more than enough clues to relay the obvious. He wondered where he was going. A thousand destinations coursed through his mind, not the most unpleasant of which was an Imperial holding cell.

The vehicle that carried him came to an abrupt stop and he could feel movement beside him. The horrible stench assaulting his nose was nearly unbearable. He could smell dead and decaying carcasses and biological waste, among other atrocities he couldn't begin to define. It was nearly enough to awaken his unconscious body, but not quite.

"Well, here's your final stop en route to the Alliance," the vaguely familiar voice rang through Ab'Lon's mind. Something was tugging at or lifting his body,

he wasn't sure which. He tried to scream, to explain the importance of his mission, anything, but his battered body refused to respond.

"Just thought you'd like to know," the voice began again, "I'm gonna find out how much of a reward is being offered for the information in this droid. I'd be willing to bet a sabacc pot that the Empire will pay better." Ab'Lon desperately tried to match a face to the voice, but recognition seemed just beyond his grasp. There was a short pause in which he could feel his body being moved around, yet he was powerless to stop it. "Well, be seeing you," the strangely familiar voice rang out as his body was released.

He fell for what seemed an eternity. All the while he wondered how all his carefully laid plans had put him into this position. He was supposed to be a savior for the Alliance - - now no one would know of his sacrifices. Someone else had the fruits of his labor and there was nothing all his years of planning could do to alter that - - no contingency that might save him.

Just as he convinced himself that he had been flung into the void, he hit the unforgiving sand, pushing out whatever air remained in his lungs. He could feel himself rolling over, as if he were tumbling downhill, and again he was powerless to stop it.

Something wrapped about his waist, stopping his descent. Needlelike projections pierced his skin through the tattered rags that served as clothing. All the pain that had plagued his body was suddenly gone. His entire body went numb and he could slowly feel his consciousness slipping away. The quiet whine of a vehicle speeding away was the last thing Tereb Ab'Lon heard before unconsciousness claimed him for the last time.

* * *

The lone figure stood in the shadows of the docking bay, the tips of his cranial tentacles bouncing erratically. His boss had only entered the freighter five minutes ago. Just speaking to Rebel operatives was considered treason, let alone making a deal to sell information to them. And of course, Bola just went off to make the deal, leaving Tavri to watch for any Imperial activity or, more likely, spies.

Tavri's gaze left the ship and wandered about the old, stone docking bay. Burn marks littered the walls and, in several places, large chunks of stone were

missing. Probably the result of blaster fire, Tavri thought. The machinery was dirty from hundreds of years of overuse, no one bothering to tinker with or clean anything that was still functional.

He gazed up into the Tatooine sky - - even from this cruddy old docking bay it was incredible. The suns set one at a time, making for lasting and beautiful sunsets like no other world could offer. It's a shame that the rest of this dustball isn't as fascinating, Tavri thought to himself, returning his gaze to the ship.

Something glittered in the waning sunlight over top of the freighter. Tavri stared a little harder, then quickly glanced around at the old machinery. None of it showed the slightest reflection.

He drew his heavy blaster pistol and whispered into the comlink clipped to his collar. "We may have trouble, be ready to get out of here." Almost as if on cue, the low hum of the freighter's engines warming up filled the docking bay.

Tavri, staying in the shadows, moved around to the opposite side of the freighter. The sounds of scuffling and something clattering on the floor, followed by a shush, rang in his ears. Whoever they were, they weren't very good at being inconspicuous. That could be good, and bad. Tavri slipped into an opening beneath the noise and started up the stairs.

He paused about midway, listening intently to the quick grunts that sounded an awful lot like... giggling. After pausing two more times, he finally arrived at the top of the stairs and carefully peered into the small controller room.

Two Ossans sat in the middle of the room. They seemed to be playing some kind of game. Tavri watched as they flung small polished, circular rocks toward a short series of small triangular rocks that made up some type of obstacle course. Each face of the triangular rock that was hit glowed slightly. The point of the game seemed to be to hit as many faces with one fling of the rock as possible. The Ossans giggled with each fling of the rocks - - Tavri couldn't help a slight smile.

A new voice mewed in, startling him. He gazed over one Ossan's shoulder to see a Jenet sitting at a small metal gadget, which he immediately recognized as an Imperial listening device. Silently, he cursed himself for getting caught up with the game.

"I hired you two to watch my back, not play games," the creature hissed. Tavri didn't know much about Jenets. But he did know they had perfect memories and an incredibly advanced sense of hearing. "Now get off your butts and guard that stairwell," he said, obviously upset. Tavri couldn't blame him - - Ossans are very childlike. If not for that, their immense strength would make for great protection.

The Ossans grumbled as they put their game away. Tavri switched his blaster over to stun and, as the Ossans began to stand up, hit them each with a blast. The bright blue aura of the stun blasts got the Jenet's attention. Tavri switched the blaster back and moved toward the frightened creature.

"For a species known for their perfect memory, you sure seem to be stumbling for words," Tavri interrupted. "Now tell me, who hired you?"

"What are you doing here," Tavri asked, although the question was rhetorical.

"I, uh, was just...", the creature started.

The creature went for its weapon, but Tavri's blast hit it square in the chest. The smell of charred fur assaulted his nose as he grabbed the equipment and started for the stairs. He stopped just long enough to grab the small sack the Ossans had put their game into and began to descend the stairs.

He smiled to himself as he switched on the comlink and gave Bola a run-down of the events.

"Good job," Bola's voice blistered through the comlink. "Everything went perfectly. In two days we're going to be 50,000 credits richer." Tavri smiled broadly at the thought of his cut and started for Bola's place to celebrate.

Tatooine Debriefing

From the personal audio report of Desert Sands senior officer DSS-0956, released to Alliance Historian Voren Na'al by the Rebel Spy Network.

The call came. After long weeks aboard Lord Darth Vader's Star Destroyer, orders finally came through to scramble my unit. Moreover, the orders were in response to the Dark Lord's personal command. Desert Sands was to drop to Tatooine and recover a jettisoned escape pod. It was assumed that top-secret information, stolen from the Empire, was hidden in the pod for pickup by Rebel agents on the desert planet.

I quickly assembled my unit aboard the drop shuttle with orders that were direct and to the point. We were to recover the data by any means necessary and return it to Lord Vader. Our mission set, the shuttle fell toward the planet, depositing us on Tatooine's sun-scorched surface.

It didn't take long to find the pod. We simply traced its rescue beacon, which automatically begins broadcasting when a pod is launched. A quick search revealed that the data was not in the pod, and no life forms were in the immediate area. But we did find evidence that droids had been in the craft when it landed, and had since proceeded away from the landing site — in different directions. They did have a slight lead on us, but the droids had done nothing to mask their trail. I split the soldiers into two units and followed the trail.

We encountered our first problem when the droids' tracks abruptly ended in the confusion of huge tread marks. From our briefing information, I knew that a Jawa sandcrawler had beaten us to them. I gave the order to locate the Jawa transport and tear it apart until the mechanicals were found. This took several days. It seems that Jawas are as numerous as the

grains of sand in the Dune Sea and even for the local residents it is virtually impossible to distinguish one group of Jawas from another. Eventually we did uncover the correct sandcrawler, but the droids had already been sold to moisture farmers.

In accordance with our orders of secrecy, we returned to silence the Jawas. Atop banthas and armed with crude blaster rifles, we attacked and destroyed the sandcrawler and its occupants, taking care to make the operation look like a raid by Sand People.

We quickly moved on to the moisture farm where the droids were sold. Records showed that the farm was owned by a registered settler named Owen Lars. Again, we arrived too late. The droids, in the company of Lars' nephew Luke Skywalker, had left the farm earlier that day and had not returned since. I assumed that Skywalker was a Rebel agent and that he had no intention of returning to the farm. I was sure that he was already on his way to Mos Eisley in order to find transport off-planet. I returned toward town to quarantine the spaceport, leaving part of my unit to eliminate Lars, his wife, and any other evidence of our activities.

Our need to maintain secrecy hampered our apprehension of the droids and Skywalker. Apparently he joined an old hermit named Ben Kenobi, and together they evaded my troopers and blasted off the planet in a modified Corellian light freighter. Additional orders followed that Desert Sands was to remain on Tatooine to complete cleanup operations, which went as expected.

For the record, I take full responsibility for the droids' escape. Any punishment that you deem necessary I will willingly submit to.

Battlefront: Raid On Yavin 4

A legion of stormtroopers were sent to Yavin 4 to confirm a Rebel presence and to gain a foothold on the planet, prior to the main assault by the approaching Death Star.

While Rebel defensive forces set up laser turrets and command areas in a temple on one side of the Massassi Fighting Arena, Imperial squads quickly secured the east overlook inside the square arena. Stormtroopers then rushed

down to the ground of the arena and engaged the Rebels in the maze of channels. Reinforcements for both sides poured in through tunnels into the arena as the Empire took the arena floor.

Rebels defending their overlook command center fired down on the Imperial troops, taking several casualties. After several minutes, the Empire rushed up to the west overlook, blasted the anti-infantry turret and captured the area.

While the heat of battle was in the fighting arena, Imperial scout troopers stealthily advanced around the perimeter of the ancient stadium and were able to capture the opposite vehicle post. The other Imperials were easily able to raid the arena from any side, a quick defeat consequently meeting the doomed Rebels.

The last obstacle was the small temple that the Rebels had reinforced with two turrets and a squad of Rebel combat speeders, some of which were under fire from AT-STs which had advanced on either side of the arena. Stormtroopers suddenly attacked through the tunnel and tall stairways from the arena, coming in a devastating wave at the Rebels, who were soon obliterated.

X-Wing: Defend The Independence

After the completion of the first Death Star the *Independence* was carrying members of the Alliance High Command, including Mon Mothma, to the Rebel base on Yavin 4 to coordinate that Alliance's defense against the major Imperial offensive that was expected to begin. While near Bestine IV it came under attack from the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer *Immortal*.

All available Rebel starfighters were scrambled to defend the ship. Keyan Farlander and others fighters from the *Defiance* soon arrived to the battle.

The Imperial attack consisted of TIE Bombers to attack the cruiser while Assault Gunboats and TIE Interceptors engaged the defending X-wings and R-22s. Despite splitting up and attacking from three different directions two of the Imperial bomber groups were quickly destroyed. The third made it through and began firing proton torpedoes at the *Independence*. The defending starfighters were caught up fighting the Gunboats but eventually broke away and were able to help the *Independence*'s gunners destroy the last bombers. The *Independence* escaped to hyperspace with its shields down but with only minimal hull damage.

Aboard the Independence, Keyan Farlander, who has just been informed that the Death Star is rumored to be operational, is hit with a blast through the Force. He has sensed the destruction of Alderaan, and he knows he has gone too far into using the Force to have any medics be of assistance to what is plaguing him, the tug of war on his "soul," so to speak. Hethen, along with his starfighter pilot comrades, helps defend an attack upon the Independence itself. After the Imperials are battled off, they receive word that the ship, along with many others in the Alliance, is being ordered to Yavin IV. The stage is being set for the Battle of Yavin . . .

By the time the *Independence* arrived at Yavin 4 during the night shift work had already begun to repair the damage, which was mostly confined to the shield coils and some electronics.

After escaping from Imperial custody Leia Organa had arrived with the Death Star plans which indicated that their best hope of defeating it lay in their starfighters, rather than their larger ships. However the Death Star was in pursuit and the *Independence's* pilots and starfighters were transferred to the Rebel base to assist in the forthcoming battle.

Alderaan Destroyed by Own Super Weapon

Imperial City, Coruscant

The galactic community was shaken by the news that Alderaan, jewel of the Core and champion of the Old Republic, tore itself apart in a series of cataclysmic explosions last week.

There is still no official explanation for Alderaan's demise, but Imperial geologists and investigators examining its remains are submitting early reports suggesting that Alderaan, while openly passive, had apparently been constructing a series of superweapons deep underground. The current theory is that one or more of these superweapons misfired and ruptured the planet's crust, resulting in the destruction of the planet. This remains speculation for the time being, however, since all reports are being classified by the Imperial Navy. Wild rumors that some sort of rogue planet appeared briefly in the Alderaan system prior to the explosion have been discounted by most reliable sources. Pro-Rebel factions continue to spread such tales, but their motives are highly suspect.

Emperor Palpatine made a brief appearance at the Palace to publicly address the Alderaan issue. He announced that he was saddened by the passing of such a noble world, and stated that if it had entrusted itself to Imperial protection, it would yet be thriving. He magnanimously extended to all surviving offworld Alderaanians an invitation to his own private resort world. "These innocent people have lost a homeworld through no fault of their own," he stated. "Offering them a new homeworld is the least I can do to compensate them for their loss."

Imperial HoloVision

T**heir Fire Has Gone Out of the Galaxy**

Imperial Holocall 12453456.7G

To: His Majesty, Emperor Palpatine

From: Lord Darth Vader

Subject: For Your Eyes Only

My Master:

The Death Star is currently tracking a small group of Rebels to what we believe to be a major Alliance base. As our victory over the Rebellion fast approaches, I must inform you of another significant event. He who has eluded us for so many years is no more. I speak of Obi-Wan Kenobi, the last and greatest of the Jedi Knights.

A stock light freighter matching the description of the craft we lost on Tatooine was captured near Alderaan and secured aboard the Death Star. Though it appeared empty, I detected a disturbance in the Force that I had not felt since the first days of your New Order — my old master, Kenobi. His last victory still fresh in my mind after all these years, I went to confront him for the final time. We duelled, lightsabers clashing in the corridors of this technological terror you have wrought. But this time I was the master.

I felt his power fade as I triumphed, my lightsaber cutting him down as the Force finally deserted him. We allowed his companions to escape, and even now they are unknowingly leading us to victory. With Obi-Wan dead, the Jedi are extinct. To quote Grand Moff Tarkin, their fire has gone out of the universe. And soon, the Rebels shall join them, crushed and scattered beneath our boots as dying embers. Only the dark side remains, my master, and your New Order. I await your bidding.

Dodonna's Story

The following text is excerpted (with permission) from General Dodonna's personal memoirs. The reader will likely be amazed at the sheer stroke of good fortune that seems to have led to the plan for destruction of the Death Star, but Luke Skywalker would argue that the Force guided Dodonna's dreams just as he claims it guided his own one-in-a-billion shot. Let the reader make his or her own decision.

We awaited the recovery of the plans with more than a little trepidation. As a former officer in the Imperial Navy, I already knew that there were men much more clever than I in charge of the great battle station's defenses. Perhaps I was being too modest—I only hoped. After all, most of the senior officers of the Old Republic were either dead or with the Alliance now. Ambitious young officers currently ran the Imperial Navy. I wished with all of my being that in their haste to design, construct, and deploy their "ultimate power in the universe" they had made a mistake somewhere ... anywhere.

I was wrong. Artoo-Detoo's readouts were ominous. The station had more guns and gunners than we had fighters by a factor of perhaps five hundred. I had also figured on an impressive shield arrangement, similar to the planetary defense grid structures employed by most Imperial bases, but this station surpassed even my greatest fears. Every portion of the fortress was heavily armored and impenetrably shielded, and these shields were all computer-linked and could be dropped independently of one another. The tractor beams, by firsthand account, were strong enough to pull a Star Destroyer into place, to say nothing of a smaller ship or a starfighter. The station was, for all intents and purposes, invulnerable.

I went to sleep that night realizing that the only way we could hope to penetrate the armor of the moon-sized station would be to send wave after wave of our heaviest vessels crashing into the Death Star, on the minuscule chance that somewhere we'd cause enough damage to render the station impotent. Of course, this would essentially mean the end of the Alliance as it stood, but if we succeeded in crippling or destroying the station, we might buy ourselves enough time to allow a new force of Rebels to arise in our place. And this time without the shadow of a Death Star looming over them. A suicidal plan is the riskiest of them all, but I was determined to take the Imperials down with us if we were going to die anyway.

I prepared my notes for the following day's meetings and headed off to bed. Strangely however, though the decision was made, I continued to think about it as sleep claimed me. I left my chamber and wandered about the halls, hoping that a little fresh air and exercise might do the trick, as it always had in the old days before a great battle.

As I gathered my thoughts and felt my limbs weaken, I heard a child crying in one of the refugee halls. I went to calm the child's tears but there was something odd about this moment, a presence I would call it, beckoning me. The child cried about a nightmare: a dragon and how it was coming to burn her village into cinders.

Then I remembered a tale, an old one passed on through the ages. A fairy tale about a dragon and the

bold Jedi Knight that slew it to save his village. "You have nothing to fear," I told the child, "for there was a hole in the dragon's armor of scales, and the Knight's lightsaber smote true and pierced the very heart of the beast, killing it instantly. The village was saved and they all lived happily ever after."

The child was content and drifted to sleep. I felt like I was young again. I ran back to my quarters and dropped into my chair. Flicking on a glow-lamp, my aching muscles and bones reminded me of my age and my eyes strained at the holographic display. I grabbed my lenses and began the painstaking search for a hole in the dragon's armor. I wanted something no one would think about having to protect, for perhaps they believed no one in their right mind would attack it.

The landing bays were protected, as were the garbage disposals. The communications towers were double shielded and even had back-up power supplies and surge dampers to prevent a shorting out of the whole system. Then I followed that idea throughout the power supply of the entire station, from the generators to the exhaust ports—and there it was! Exhaust ports are made to vent particle flux and generator byproducts, but they are designed to work only one way—out. "What would happen if energy was sent back down the way it came?" I asked myself. I consulted the computer and all answers led to either nothing, more backup systems, or too much time before significant damage was inflicted.

Then, I pulled back from the image and rubbed my eyes. It was getting to be early morning and the Death Star was not very far away according to reports. I gave one last dejected look at the maps and leaned back further.

My chair gave way. Falling onto the floor, I narrowly avoided breaking my neck and decided that four hours of sleep was better than none at all. I told the holoprojector to close down. I resigned myself to die today without bloodshot eyes at least.

Then I saw it. A long narrow line running from the exhaust port right to the core of the reactor. The line was perfectly straight, like a target, or the blade of a lightsaber driving its way to the heart of the station, the core of the reactor. I realized that if anything at all passed down that tube and hit the sensitive and unstable reactor core, the whole station would be destroyed.

A direct hit from a skilled pilot would travel smoothly down the gullet of the reactor. After all, the exhaust port casing had to be shielded to keep its waste from reentering the ship. The irony was exquisite—if the shot hits, its own protections will guarantee its destruction.

My hopes were momentarily dashed as I asked the computer how big the tube was. Two meters in diameter. It might as well have been two millimeters. Even targeting computers would be sorely tested to place a shot in the vent.

And then it was when I realized how important hope was. That Jedi Knight could only slay the dragon because he tried. The Alliance could only defeat the Death Star because it tried. The Alliance had a chance.

ASSAULT ON RUUL

*"You just get me into the computer complex. I'll crack those Rebel codes."
—Dellis Tantor to Brenn Tantor*

Grand General Malcor Brashin, tracking the Millennium Falcon, arrived in the Ruul system and discovered that, while the Falcon had fled to Alderaan, Rebel forces had taken control of the central computer complex on Ruul.

Brashin landed troops under the command of Captain Brenn Tantor. Under the supervision of his training officer, Captain Beri Tulon, Tantor led a force that took back several mines captured by the Rebels and seized a Rebel base before passing through a choke point of Rebel turrets. From there, Tantor recaptured the computer facility. His brother Dellis was inserted into the facility to slice into Rebel records.

The relay on the facility, however, had been damaged in the attack, making it impossible to transmit the data to the Star Destroyer Inquisitor in orbit.

Fortunately, Dellis discovered a cache of remote relay beacons in the facility. Brenn smashed through the remaining Rebel positions, clearing the way for Dellis to lay a network of beacons to an uplink tower three kilometers away. From there, the information was quickly beamed to Inquisitor, where it was determined that the Rebels had seized several energy collectors on Sarapin. Brashin and the Tantors continued there minus Tulon, who was reassigned by Brashin after he promoted Tantor over Tulon's head.

WAR PORTRAIT: GARVEN DREIS

Helmet tucked under one arm, Red Leader strode across the Massassi base hangar, now thrumming with activity. Yavin 4's collection of battered X-wings and Y-wings had sprouted fuel hoses and diagnostic monitors as orange-suited pilots, technicians, and droids all raced to get the fighters ready for takeoff. Red Leader's eyes flicked across the men and women preparing the birds for a hellish encounter with the battle station inexorably approaching the jungle moon. He saw anxiety and fear, but neither panic nor hopelessness. The Rebels had a job to do and they were doing it, despite knowing that job would likely be followed, in harrowingly short order, by their deaths.

But two young pilots beneath the wing of a T-65 weren't grim at all. They were downright giddy, talking excitedly over each other with dazed grins on their faces. The taller one was Biggs Darklighter, Red Three, and the other was the new kid, Luke Skywalker.

That name sent Red Leader's mind back two decades, to the borecrawler caves of Virujansi. He'd been just Garven Dreis then—a kid barely graduated from a T-16 to a Z-95 Headhunter, pressed into service with the Rarefied Air Cavalry to hunt the Seppie droids that had infiltrated the caverns. Instruments had been useless in there—it was stick-and-kick flying, blasting any tinny that stuck its head up and trying not to become a smoking spot on a rock wall. Fortunately, he'd been flying those caverns his entire life, and knew every twist and turn as well as the rolling hills of his family farm.

"Dave" Dreis might have been a kid then, but he was also the hottest pilot Virujansi had ever seen—with one exception. That was Anakin Skywalker, the Hero With No Fear, who'd arrived with a Republic task force to kick the Seppies off the planet. Dreis had flown lead on Skywalker's first trip through the caverns, wondering how long the Jedi would be able to stay with him. Skywalker had sat a meter behind Dreis's left wing for two minutes, then snap-rolled his Delta-7 and taken lead. It had been Garven who'd struggled to keep up. Later, back at base, Skywalker had registered Dreis's astonishment and just grinned.

And now, here was another Skywalker. A farm boy from Tatooine, same as Darklighter. Interesting.

Red Leader had seen too much since Virujansi. He'd seen his village burning, the fields he'd tended reduced to ash by the Empire. He'd seen transports cracked open by TIE fighters on the slightest suspicion, their passengers spilling out with mouths gaping uselessly in space. He'd seen men and women

who could no longer stand aside make the same decision he had, and take to the skies against the Empire's pilots. They'd died by the dozens, by the hundreds. He'd recruited many of them to do so, sent them to their deaths, sacrificed all they had been and all they would be in the hope of ever so slightly slowing the Imperial war machine. And now these boys would be next. In an hour, in all likelihood, they'd be particles of frozen meat orbiting the gas giant overhead.

It didn't seem like anything to laugh about.

"Are you Luke Skywalker?" he demanded. "Have you been checked out on the Incom T-65?"

Skywalker looked frightened, but Darklighter stepped in before he could respond: "Sir," he said grandly, "Luke is the best bush pilot in the Outer Rim Territories."

Dreis knew what his old friend Davish Krail would have done—he'd have fixed these two with a murderous look and then left tooth marks all over them, letting them know what they'd be facing up there, what the consequences of the slightest slip-up would be, and demanding to know why he shouldn't get two stick-jockeys who'd be double-checking preflight instead of giggling like a couple of addled cantina girls. But Pops was busy with his own Y-wing, and Dreis had never been one for chewing up his own pilots. What they'd meet up there would do that soon enough.

Besides, there was something to be said for being the best bush pilot around. Particularly with that name.

Skywalker. Red Five.

Maybe it was a good omen. They could sure use one.

"You'll do all right," he told the boy, forcing a smile onto his face, one that might even convince Luke he thought it was true.

The Letter Home

This letter was written from a Rebel X-wing pilot to his mother the morning before the Battle of Yavin. As with most letters home from Rebel regulars, it went untransmitted for several years for security reasons. The pilot's name has been omitted. He died during the assault.

Dear Mom,

I know you don't think much of what I'm doing now, but it's something I feel I must do. I know Dad would've understood, but then again, you didn't agree with him on that matter anyway.

I just want you to know that I'm about to get very close to actual combat, against odds we have little hope of surmounting. I know that may sound crazy, but by the time you get this letter, you'll know whether we succeeded and whether I made it. We're going in against the greatest war machine ever built, something that drives the Empire's policy these days — a machine built for domination, subjugation, and conquest.

I know you hear very little about what we're doing back home, and see even less on the holomedia. What you do find out is only what the Empire releases, and they outright lie most of the time. Sure, we can argue about that until doomsday, but that's not what I wrote you about.

I wanted you to know that I feel I'm doing something important. I can't save the galaxy myself; I don't think anyone can alone. But I'm helping out, and the few lives I've already saved from the Empire's tyrannies have made it all worth it in my view.

How long it may remain the way it is and how free we will be is impossible to say at this moment. By tomorrow, we may not have a definite answer, but the signs will be unmistakable.

Let the family know what I'm doing. You don't have to glorify it, but don't demean it either. One day you'll understand, I hope, and on that day I pray this will all have been a bad dream from very long ago. I love you and may the Force be with you. And us.

Love,

Your Son

X-Wing: The Farlander Papers

Just before the Battle of Yavin, Keyan Farlander talks to Luke Skywalker about the Force, seeking answers to the feelings he has been experiencing. He then suggests that Luke join them in the upcoming battle. Once the briefing is over, the two don't have a chance to speak again until after the battle is over. Keyan will be right there with everyone else, flying a Y-wing during the battle.

Finding Work

"Is it watching us?"

"What? Is *what* watching us?"

"That Jawa over there — don't turn! Looks like it's got a comlink. It may be the same one who has been following us since we landed here this morning." Vareth's brows furrowed in concentration over her fozbeer. It was bad enough that they had forged ship credentials, but they lacked time or money to even try and get their own ID's changed. And they certainly had no legitimate business in this city. Now she wished she hadn't let Garron talk her into this. Pull a job for a gangster like the Hutt? She almost shuddered. But it was the only way to turn a quick credit. And it wasn't like they were preparing to engage in robbery or theft. Not really.

She glanced at her companion. At least Garron looked pretty calm. But it was difficult to tell with a Sullustan.

"How is it I am to tell you if he is watching or not, shall I?" asked Garron.

"Sigh. I don't know. I guess you can't. I wish we had an electronic scanner, or some kind of Droid eavesdropper. Or maybe —"

Garron cut her off. "Yawn."

"Pardon me?" asked Vareth, watching the Jawa out of the corner of her eye.

"Yawn, yes. Trust me."

Garron smiled. That was their personal signal, and their private joke. No one should ever trust a smuggler. "Okay."

Vareth did what she hoped was a good imitation of a yawn. She saw Garron's own jaw muscles clench until he finally succumbed to the overwhelming urge. And as she watched, the suspected spy turned away and put its hand to its mouth. Vareth grinned and momentarily considered the universality of the yawn reflex.

"Good idea, Garron. Let's go." The two stood and swiftly left the cantina. Their exit was noted.

The glare of the suns on the sand made Vareth want to turn back to the dim coolness of the bar. She glanced at Garron, who had already placed goggles over his sensitive eyes.

"How do we find his place? This whole area is a maze. We went in to get directions, but nobody seemed to know."

"Perhaps perchance it is not we who need to find them; the other ones must find us?"

"Yeah, maybe. Let's keep moving, though. I don't want to give anybody time to get a bead on us." Vareth put her scarf up to her nose as they passed a group of

Jawas. At least she had learned this much about Tatooine.

"Excuse me," spoke a metallic voice. Vareth froze. It sounded like a stormtrooper. She turned slowly around. She blinked once, then twice. There was no one there.

"Excuse me," the voice said again, from somewhere near her waist. Vareth looked down to see the Jawa holding a hand translator to its throat. "I have greetings from your employer. Please follow me."

"See what I have been telling is true now, yes?"

"Shut up, Garron." They followed the brown-cloaked figure as it weaved through the crowds, avoided a speeding landspeeder, and ducked into a dim doorway. Vareth easily kept stride with the creature as it sped down the cool dark tunnel, past passageways and side tunnels, first taking a left, then a right, skipping several doors, turning another corner, and finally stopping at a closed door. It muttered something Vareth was sure would have been incomprehensible even if she had heard it clearly. The door slid open with a scraping sound of steel against sand.

The room was dimly lit by a portable generator sitting on the floor. The earthy smell invading her nostrils was produced by the enormous number of mushrooms and other fungi covering the floor and walls. The only furniture in the room was a chair occupied by a pasty-looking Twi'lek, his head tails draped around his shoulders. The Twi'lek swallowed the last of his mushroom and licked his fingers. Vareth heard Garron enter the room behind her, and the door shut. This Twi'lek was egotistical indeed, to feel safe against two free-traders. Then again, Vareth reminded herself, they were here at his disposal to gain employment. Still, showing any fear would likely not get them the job.

"Yes," the sitting being said, his left head tail twitching, "you have been watched since you entered the system. And if you were to injure me, it is unlikely you could find your way back out of this maze."

Vareth straightened up to her full height. "Of course. Except my friend here," she stepped to the left to let the Twi'lek get a good view of Garron, "is a Sullustan. When it comes to tunnels they have a photographic memory. Shall we try this again?" She stepped forward. "My name is Vareth."

"Greetings, sly one. I am Bib Fortuna." He paused for a moment to let the announcement sink in, as if it were some great pronouncement. Because of the way the Twi'lek carried himself, Vareth had an itching notion to kneel, but ignored it. Fortuna cleared his throat. "You appear adequate to the task."

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3. A toy shop receipt for Palitoy Star Wars purchases must accompany all entries.

4. All entries will be examined and prizes awarded by a panel of judges whose decision shall be final and legally binding. No correspondence can be entered into.

5. Age of entrant will be taken into consideration when judging.

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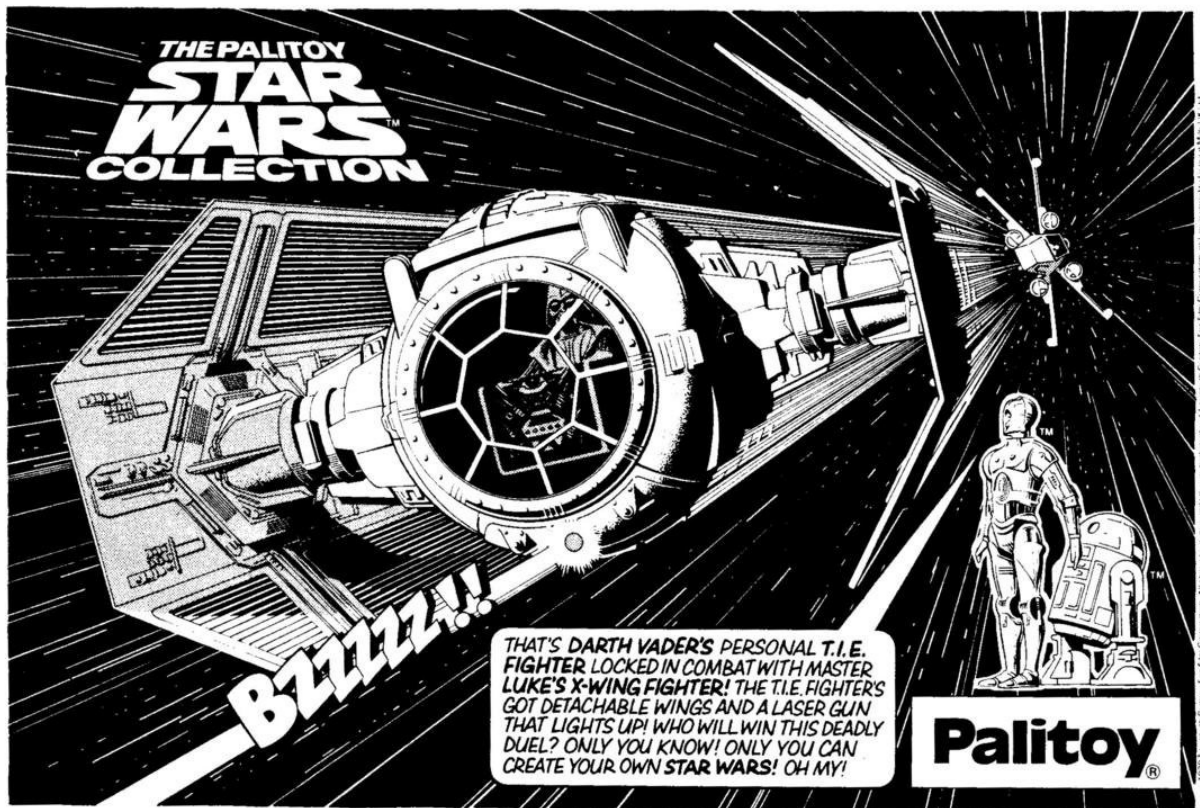
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Battlefront: Revenge Of The Empire

"When the Death Star was destroyed, about half of the 501st Legion was still in the hangar getting to their ships. Of those who made it out, another third were caught in the explosion. I'd fought with some of those men for over twenty years. Afterwards, those of us that survived hooked up with a nearby Imperial fleet making a retaliatory strike on the Rebel's base on Yavin 4."

"It wasn't the best thought out plan, but we were cut off from our leaders, tired, and operating on instinct. If not for our training, we probably would've never gotten past their orbital defenses."

—Unidentified 501st Legion stormtrooper

The pilots of the 501st quickly discovered that a large rebel force was on board several GR-75 medium transports. However, TIE/sa bombers swarmed the transports and quickly took them down. The next main target was the Mon Calamari Star Cruiser. Before they could attack, however, starfighters were being torn to shreds by Corellian Corvettes. Despite this, bombers managed to surround and destroy the Corvettes.

With the odds turned against them, the Rebel fleet chose a daring strategy. They would hyperspace straight through the Imperial Star Destroyer. To deflect any attacks, starfighters were launched against the Imperial forces. They were quickly cut down

The 501st then launched an assault on the Star Cruiser. The 501st pilots destroyed the heavy turbolasers, clearing the way for the *Victory II* frigates to barrage the hull. The bombers destroyed the engines and immobilized the starship, stopping the hyperspace jump and leaving the cruiser clear for capture

The Imperial force then launched a ground assault against the Massassi base. A *Sentinel*-class landing craft landed on the moon and 501st forces chose to attack a Rebel hangar base inside a Massassi Temple. They secured the fountain and viaduct. Fighting through a heavy Rebel force, including AAC-1 speeder tanks, they next captured the reflecting pool.

The Rebel forces, who had been caught off guard by the sudden attack, managed to regroup and begin a counterattack. Closing a blast door over the hanger behind them, a massive force of infantry and armor attacked the reflecting pool. However, the Imperials, despite high casualties, managed to stop the attack in its tracks.

Before they could attack the main temple, they would have to break through the door. A squad of Imperial engineers deployed a bomb to the hangar door, blowing it open. The Imperials then stormed the temple and went into an all out brawl with the remaining rebels. Using this as a distraction, a squad of stormtroopers entered a small command room and killed the Bothan High Command.

"Frankly, I don't remember much of the fighting. I guess we won."

"After the battle, the surviving members of the 501st finally caught their breath. The Empire had taken the Rebel's best shot and come up standing. Now it was our turn to strike."

—Unidentified 501st Legion stormtrooper

Rogue Squadron III: Revenge Of The Empire

"The Imperial bombardment continues, but it looks like they're moving forward with an attack from the planet surface. This raid is much more intense than usual. We're evacuating the last of the command staff..."

—General Jan Dodonna

Following the destruction of the first Death Star battlestation at the Battle of Yavin, the Galactic Empire invaded the Rebel Alliance base on Yavin 4 in an attempt to capture the Rebel leaders as an act of retribution.

The Imperials sent a larger attack than usual against the base, determined to crush the Rebels at last. Red Squadron, led by Commander Luke Skywalker, were ordered to take out the Imperial transports that were landing on the planet.

Upon the destruction of the remaining four transports, the invasion was temporarily stalled. A TIE fighter then ambushed Luke only for it to be shot down by Red Three, Sarkli. Afterward, the second wave of Imperial transports, consisting of loader shuttles, arrived to strengthen the ground forces. The Rebel General Jan Dodonna then ordered Red Squadron to shoot down the loader shuttles, as well as defend the final Rebel transport *Luminous* that was currently docked on one of the islands near the temple until it was ready for takeoff. Afterward, the *Luminous* managed to escape. After a majority of the loader shuttles and dropships were destroyed, a transport slipped through defenses and deployed a stormtrooper force into the Great Temple, pinning General Dodonna in the Ceremonial Chamber. Skywalker ordered Sarkli to defend the transports, while he and Wedge Antilles landed in the temple and shot their way through the attackers.

The two managed to save Captain Bren Derlin and Dodonna, and a squad of Rebel troopers, and proceeded to the entrance of the base, where they were pinned down by two AT-STs. Sarkli swooped down and destroyed the walkers, allowing the group to escape in a GR-75 medium transport. General Dodonna then thanked Skywalker, as he felt it was because of Skywalker sending Sarkli off that there were survivors.

A WORD FROM GENERAL CRACKEN

The war against the Galactic Empire is more than a war of SpecForce troops against stormtroopers, of Corellian Corvettes against Imperial Star Destroyers. It is a war of individuals—spies, informants, smugglers—who all do their small part to undermine and hinder the Empire at every opportunity.

In the short time since the Battle of Yavin, the oppressed people of the galaxy have begun to take notice of us. The Alliance is now more than a collection of "dreamers and deviants," as the Empire's propaganda ministries would have everyone believe. The Alliance is a military force, and even if we face daunting odds, we are still a threat to the Empire.

While this is a fantastic accomplishment for the Rebel

Alliance, it also hinders our efforts. Having active and vocal supporters lends even more credibility to us, but it comes at a time when we sorely lack the manpower and weaponry to do much about the Empire which oppresses us all.

That is where our operatives come in. The Alliance cannot compete with the Empire in terms of soldiers or resources. Therefore, to defeat the Emperor, we must outsmart him. We can only do that by gathering as much information as possible and by using contacts with the bureaucracy of the Empire to further our objectives.

This datafile detailing some of our more useful operatives is being made available to you, the Alliance's most trusted intelligence gatherers and military operatives, in the hopes that you will be able to call on these people for assistance. Someday, these people may require you to help them continue their duties for the Alliance. These beings range from "unimportant" Imperial soldiers who gather top secret military data to flamboyant pirates and smugglers who flaunt the Empire's authority at every opportunity, yet lay down their lives for our cause on a daily basis. Some are people who volunteer information and assistance, yet choose not to actively join the Alliance. In any event, these people are as important to the Alliance as are the front line soldiers who face the Empire's war machine every day.

Learn about these people. Get an understanding of what they are doing for us and how you can assist them. And remember, some time, when you least expect it, one of these operatives will show up and probably save your life.

Good day, and may the Force be with us all.

Respectfully, General Airen Cracken



A Certain Point of View

"Heh, heh, Lieutenant, I think he's got you this time!" engineer Dap Nechel chuckled.

Lieutenant Celia Durasha ran her hand along the barrel of her blaster and glanced at Nechel. She knew how much the short, bearded alien enjoyed these ritual match-ups between the *Kuari Princess*' navigator and Detien Kaileel, the security chief. Their banter enlivened the luxury liner's routine passage along the Relgim Run between Endoraan and Mantooine.

"Just wait a minute now, Dap," she said, holstering the blaster and leaning across the holo gameboard to study her farangs and waroots. Celia frowned, her emerald-green eyes narrowed. The chief's last move had indeed given him the advantage.

Seated across from her, Security Chief Kaileel wore a grin -- at least Celia thought she detected a grin. The Kabieroun's long snout hid most of his mouth.

"Come now, my dear crimson-haired friend," Kaileel said, his Basic heavily accented, "shall we try another game?" Dark intelligent eyes twinkled, reflecting the yellowish-green light of the gameboard. He sat back, his giant frame obscuring the overstuffed pillows that decorated the sofas on the *Kuari Princess*' observation deck.

Shaking her head, Celia rolled her eyes. "Why is it, Dap," she kidded the engineer, "that I seem to lose every time you're around?"

Dap smiled at her mischievously, then winked at Kaileel. "I bring the Chief good luck!"

"I don't think I'm going to invite you to any more games!" Celia laughed, falling back onto the sofa. Sighing, she stared out the viewport at the mottled lights of stars rushing past them as the ship travelled through hyperspace. "Wish I had time for another game, Chief. We'll be coming up on Mantooine soon, and I'm supposed to be on the bridge."

Chief Kaileel nodded, muscles rippling along his elongated neck. "I imagine the captain would appreciate the presence of his best officers at their respective duty stations."

"Indeed," Dap agreed.

"I'll have some free time after we make orbit. Shall we get together, say, at 1930?" Celia asked.

"No good," the Chief replied. "I have some things to take care of on Mantooine. I won't be back until much later."

"Things to take care of, eh?" Celia kidded him, picking up her navaid datapad from the seat. "All right, Chief, when do I get to meet this new girlfriend you've been harboring on Mantooine?"

"And what about the ones on Aris and Vykos?" Dap added. Kaileel blushed a darker shade of green than normal and straightened in his seat. "No girlfriends," he told them, tugging at the earhoop hanging from his left lobe. "Just ... friends."

"Okay, if you say so," Celia replied, a sly smile tugging at the corner of her lip. Standing up, she brushed a stray red hair off the silky white sleeve of her uniform and carefully adjusted the blaster holstered around her hips. "Well, time for work, gentlebeings."

Dap took one last gulp of his drink and bounced down from the sofa. "Ah, yes," he said, "an engineer's work is never done. *Vetoosh*, friends."

"*Vetoosh*," Celia replied as Dap headed down the corridor. "Chief K?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Any progress on finding those missing blasters?"

Kaileel swung his massive head. "No," he said. "I'm afraid the captain will be unhappy with my report. I've been over this a dozen times with my security people. It's hard to believe one of them might be lying. But this is the third incident. All those blasters were in secure lockers in our offices. I just don't see how anyone else could have taken them."

"And they haven't turned up anywhere on the ship?"

"I've had scanning teams searching every centimeter of the *Princess*, though I don't expect to find them here," he said. "No, I'm afraid this last batch may

have been smuggled off the ship at one of our port stops and will turn up in Rebel hands like those the Imperials discovered on Mantooine."

"You sound worried, Chief," Celia observed.

"This will not look good on my record, Lieutenant," Kaileel reminded her.

"Chief, your record is impeccable!" she told him. "You've got the best security team this side of the Rim!"

"With a dozen weapons missing?" he grimaced. "Thank you for your vote of confidence, little Crimson."

Nodding, Celia watched him rise, his huge form towering far above hers. "I'll talk with you when you return from Mantooine." She started to walk away, then turned back to face him. "I want my rematch!" she called. "You're not going to win again!"

* * *

The decks were crowded with passengers boarding the *Kuari Princess* on Mantooine for the return trip through the Maelstrom Nebula to Endoraan. Celia nodded politely to a group of Ithorians and three Corellian businessmen. She smiled at a young couple, still dressed in their wedding finery. Obviously on their honeymoon, they didn't seem to notice anything around them, only each other.

"Ticket, please," hostess Kelsa Vilrein asked a very wealthy-looking female passenger.

"Miss," the woman asked, "can you tell me where the observation deck is? I don't want to miss our entry into the Maelstrom. I've heard so much about it."

"That's on the Lido deck," Kelsa told her. "The captain will announce our approach. Of course, you realize we won't enter the Maelstrom for 15 hours."

"Yes, thank you, my dear."

Kelsa tipped her head toward Celia. "Good evening, Lieutenant."

"How are you, Kelsa?" Celia asked the dark-haired woman.

"Ticket, please," she replied, glancing down to check another passenger's accommodations. "Homthor Deck. That's up two levels." She winked at Celia. "I'm fine, Lieutenant."

"Has Chief Kaileel come back on board?" Celia asked.

"He returned about a half hour ago. Ticket, please."

"Thanks, Kelsa."

"Celia?"

The voice was familiar, but one she hadn't heard in a long time. Looking around, Celia stared wide-eyed. Her heart skipped a beat. "Adion? How in the worlds--"

"I'd recognize that red mane anywhere!" he exclaimed reaching out to take her hand. "Celia Durasha. Good skies! What are you doing so far from Lankashiir?"

"I'm the *Kuari Princess*' navigator. And look at you--""What do you think?" he asked, tugging at his tunic to straighten any part of the uniform that might dare to be out of place.

"Lieutenant ... hm," she said, eyeing his tall muscular frame. Adion Lang looked more handsome than she remembered. Maybe it's the uniform, she thought. "I like it."

"Celia, you look absolutely ravishing," he told her.

"Shh!" she replied, turning her head as the heat rose in her cheeks. "You're not allowed to embarrass the ship's navigator."

"All right, I'll try not to."

"I'm good friends with the Security Chief, Lieutenant Lang. Any misbehavior and I'll have him throw you in the brig!"

"Yes, ma'am," he grinned. "You haven't changed at all, Celia."

"Not one little bit!" she laughed. "Now, c'mon. Let's get out of the line of traffic." Leading him through the ship's corridors toward the observation deck,

Celia couldn't help but notice the two white-armored shadows that followed them at a discrete distance. "Friends of yours?" she asked.

Adion glanced back. "Oh, them? Don't worry about them. Just a couple of guards who were lucky enough to accompany me," he replied nonchalantly. "Tell me, Celia, how long has it been?"

She thought for a moment. "Seven years, I guess."

"A long time," he said. "Tell me about you, your family. I'm afraid I've lost touch with your brothers."

"Well, Jak is still in the Navy, stationed on board the *Relentless*. Bern is a lieutenant with an armored battalion in the Generis Sector, and I just spoke with Raine last week. His unit was preparing to ship out to Ralltiir -- some kind of local trouble, I suppose. I miss them all terribly, but especially Raine."

"I guess that's natural -- he is your twin brother, after all," Adion said. "But what happened to all your grand plans? I thought you would attend the Academy like your brothers."

Celia frowned, unable to ignore the incoming tide of emotions that were attached to that subject.

Adion stopped in the middle of the corridor, obviously aware that he'd touched on a sore spot. "I'm sorry," he told her, taking her hand into his. "I can tell something's wrong."

"It's okay," Celia said as old feelings of anger flooded her senses. "My application was never forwarded past Sector."

"What! Who would do such a thing?"

Staring past Adion, her voice trembled, full of bitterness. "Commander Reise Durasha."

"Your father?"

Nodding, Celia walked away from Adion. She ran her hand along the gold handrail that lined the ornately-decorated corridor.

"But why?" Adion asked, taking two giant strides to catch up with her.

She stopped, planting her arms across her chest, and looked him straight in the eye. "I believe his words were, 'No daughter of mine is going to attend the Academy. It's no place for women,' or something to that effect."

Adion lowered his eyes, shuffling his feet on the ship's polished marble flooring. His silence stung louder than a thunderclap.

"You, too? You agree with him?" she asked, trying to temper her anger and hurt.

"Celia, you would have been remarkable at the Academy. But do you know where most women end up after graduation?"

She glared at him. She knew all right. Backwater worlds, crummy assignments, with little chance to prove yourself, or to ever see a promotion. But it never mattered to her. She had longed to wear the uniform, to proudly serve as others in her family had done for generations.

"Your father was only thinking of your well-being," Adion said.

"My well-being? Excuse me, why would he be so concerned about a daughter he barely knew."

"And yet you wanted to follow in his footsteps! See your family every three or four years, if it was convenient? Celia," he admonished her gently, "how can you still be upset with him after all these years?"

"He interfered with my life, Adion. He had no right to make that decision for me."

"Perhaps you're right."

"Can we drop this subject?" she asked. "You haven't told me what you're doing on the *Kuari Princess*."

Adion looped his arm through hers. "Show me your ship," he said, "and I'll tell you about my assignment to Aris."

"Aris? Sector HQ, eh?" she smiled, leading him up the grand staircase to the Lido observation deck. "I'm impressed. A plush job, no doubt."

"You are looking at the new assistant to the Moff," he told her.

"Congratulations, Adion! That's wonderful," she stopped, turning to look out one of the viewports. Mantooine loomed ahead of them, the glare of sunlight illuminating the horizon as the ship's orbit took them across the terminator into day. "It's so beautiful up here," she sighed. "But just wait until we enter the Maelstrom Nebula."

"I've heard about it," he said, his voice softening. "But it can't be as spectacular as the lovely red hair I used to tug on from my seat in physics classes." He pushed a loose curl away from her face then touched her lightly on the cheek. "I've missed you, Celia."

Celia blushed and looked away from him. Adion reached out to turn her face back toward his. Putting his arm around her waist, he pulled her close. Slowly, his lips met hers. For a brief moment neither one noticed the curious on-lookers who passed by.

Trembling, Celia pulled away from him. Old memories rushed in upon her senses. There may have been a time, years ago, when she would have followed him to the ends of the galaxy. But then he'd left their homeworld to attend Raithal Academy and she hadn't seen or heard from him in all these years. Did he expect to pick up right where they'd left off?

Her eyes fixed on his. There was something different about him, something in those piercing blue eyes that she couldn't quite put her finger on. "I've got to go, Adion. We'll be leaving orbit soon and I'm supposed to be on duty now."

"May I see you later?" he asked.

"I--I'll check with you in the morning," she said, turning to leave. Confused by emotions he'd stirred deep within her, emotions she thought she'd left behind in the past, Celia hurried away. She needed time to think. Some safe harbor. And she knew exactly where to find it.

* * *

The door slid open into a modestly decorated office. A hologram on one wall displayed a cross section of the *Kuari Princess*. A dozen monitors occupied another wall to the right of a desk that was littered with a half dozen datacards.

Chief Kaileel was hunched over his computer terminal. He glanced up at Celia, a momentary look of annoyance vanished quickly, replaced by a gentler expression.

"Good evening, dear Crimson. May I help you with something?"

"I, uh, thought I'd get a brief update on those missing blasters, Chief," she said unconvincingly.

Kaileel's large dark eyes frowned at her over the top of the monitor. "I have nothing new to report, Lieutenant," he replied, eyeing her suspiciously. "Was there something else I might help you with?"

Celia's eyes wandered around the room. "I've got the bridge watch for another hour, then I'll be ready for our rematch."

Kaileel drummed his long green fingers on the desk. "It is rather late, you realize."

"You're not trying to get out of this game, are you?"

"Of course not, Lieutenant. I shall be off duty in two hours."

"Good," Celia replied, glad she'd have the game to keep her mind off a certain handsome Imperial lieutenant. "Then I'll expect you to meet me on the observation deck."

The edges of Kaileel's mouth curled upward behind his snout. "Oh, my dear little crimson-haired friend, I would not miss the chance to beat you again for all the spice on Kessel!"

"Beat me?" she smiled, her mood suddenly lighter. "Don't count on it, Chief!"

"Get to your bridge, little one. Drive your ship! Steer us a straight course!"

Leaning over the desk, Celia's face grew serious. "You look tired, Chief," she said. "Is everything all right?"

Kaileel leaned back into his chair. "Yes -- well, no," he admitted when he saw the frown on her face. "I had some disturbing news on my visit to Mantooine."

"Chief?" another voice called from the doorway. "Sorry to interrupt, Lieutenant."

"What is it, Raban?" Kaileel asked the security officer as Celia walked behind the desk to stare out the viewport.

"We've got a report of a fight between two passengers at the Galleria Shop."

"Who's on it?"

"Brankton. And we've sent in a backup."

"Keep me posted," Kaileel told the man, then turned to smile at Celia. "This may turn out to be an exciting cruise."

"We haven't even left orbit yet!" Celia marvelled.

"And you thought your job was interesting."

"Chief, what were you about to tell me -- the news you got on Mantooine?"

"Later, my dear. I'll tell you later."

Celia eyed her old friend. There was something bothering him. But before she could probe for more information the captain's voice sounded over the intercom. "Chief Kaileel, is Lieutenant Durasha with you?"

"Yes, Captain," Kaileel said.

"I was just on my way to the bridge, sir," Celia added.

"Lieutenant, I need to speak with you privately. Will you meet me in my office right away?"

"Of course, sir. On my way. I wonder what that's all about," she said as Kaileel clicked off the intercom. "I'll see you in a couple of hours, Chief."

* * *

"Captain Glidrick, you wanted to see me?"

"Please, Lieutenant, sit down," he said. Stern Glidrick was a middle-aged man with brownish hair that was just beginning to streak with gray. Like Celia, he

was dressed in blue trousers with a gold stripe down each leg. Medals decorated his white tunic -- a reminder to everyone of his service in the Imperial Navy.

"What is it, sir? What's happened?"

"I received a message from your father --"

Celia stood up abruptly, her face reddening. "My father sent you a message?" she asked, the anger in her voice unmistakable.

"Please, Lieutenant--"

"I want nothing to do with him--"

"Lieutenant Durasha, sit down!" the captain ordered. He took a deep breath. "Your father sent word through me, because he knew what your reaction would be. It's about your brother--"

Celia paled. "What?" Her hands trembled as she grasped the edge of Glidrick's desk and collapsed into the chair.

"He's been killed," the captain told her. "I'm sorry."

Closing her eyes, Celia chewed on the inside of her lip, trying to force back the tears. "Captain, I have three brothers. Which one--"

Glidrick glanced down at the datapad. "It's Raine," he said. "Your father said there are more details on this holo that accompanied the message I received. Take all the time you need, Celia. I'm truly sorry."

"Thank you, sir," Celia replied numbly, taking the holo from him. She rose slowly from the chair and somehow managed to find her way to her quarters. Alone, Celia listened to the message. When it ended, she paused it, staring at her father's frozen holo image. The small room seemed to close in around her.

Unconsciously, Celia ran her hand back and forth across her holster, then downward, brushing against her soft leather boot. She unsheathed the knife hidden there. It had been a special gift from Raine, one he had given to her the night before he'd left for his last term of service. Sitting beneath Lankashiir's

star-filled skies, they had reminisced about the good times they'd had exploring the forests of their homeworld.

She turned the knife over several times. Light from the holo image touched the steel gray blade and cascaded across the desk. Her small hand melded perfectly around its handle which was carved from rare ebon. She studied the flaming red jewel embedded just above the blade, watched it sparkle brilliantly even in the dimly lit cabin.

Good memories seemed no more than a distant echo now. Celia set the knife down, rubbed her hand wearily across her brow and clicked on her father's message again.

"Your brother Raine has been killed by Rebel forces on the planet Ralltiir," the figure in the holo said. Reise Durasha looked much older, and much thinner than when she'd seen him last. His graygreen Imperial Army uniform seemed to hang loosely on his bent frame. Dark shadows ringed his eyes. "I know how close you and Raine were ..."

Celia buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. Emotionally exhausted, numb with grief, sleep finally ended her pain. When the cabin intercom buzzed more than an hour later, she awoke suddenly. Slowly, she reached over and clicked it on.

"Durasha here," she said wearily.

"Celia, I thought we had a game this evening." She stared blankly at the comm panel.

"Celia?" the Chief called again, more insistently.

"Oh, Chief," she finally said, "I forgot."

"Is everything all right?" he asked. "We don't have to play tonight--"

"No, just give me a few minutes."

When Celia arrived on the observation deck, the holo gameboard was darkened. A tall glass of some exotic beverage sat on the edge of the playing table.

"What's this?" Celia asked, pointing toward the drink.

"Zadarian brandy. You sounded like you could use a good stiff drink," Kaileel told her.

Celia blinked a tear from her eye. She picked up the brandy, swirled it around the glass thoughtfully, and finally took a long sip. The brew trickled down her throat, but its warmth did nothing to diminish the chill she felt. She could feel the Chief's eyes upon her. "What has happened?" he asked.

Staring out at the stars blurring past them in hyperspace, Celia didn't seem to hear him.

"Celia?" He stood up, placing his hand lightly on her shoulder. Trembling, Celia turned toward Kaileel and looked up into his eyes.

"My brother--" she cried, burying her face in his chest.

Kaileel wrapped his long scaly arms around her. He held her tightly. "I'm so sorry, my dear little Crimson," he said.

When her tears dried, Celia told her old friend how Raine's unit had been ambushed by Rebels at the spaceport on Ralltiir. Kaileel shook his head sadly. "So many will die," he said quietly. "On both sides."

Celia's eyes grew wide. "You don't support the Rebel cause, do you?"

"Let's just say I disagree with the Empire's methods of resolving this conflict," he told her.

"What do you mean, Chief?"

Kaileel gazed out the viewport. "Think of the Maelstrom Nebula, Celia," he said.

"What about it?"

"From Mantooine -- how does it appear?"

"It's barely a speck," she replied.

"True," he nodded. "What happens when we enter the Nebula?" She threw him a puzzled look.

"Is this a class in astrophysics, Chief?"

"Please, follow along with me," he said.

"All right. When we enter the Nebula our communications don't work well. And our sensors are blinded. But what does that have to do with--"

Kaileel held up one long green finger. "From a great distance we can only surmise the hazards the Nebula may present to us. Why is it that until we're close, until it touches us, we don't recognize the danger?"

"The Empire is like that, little Crimson. From a distance, we may not feel the danger -- we're too far removed from its touch. But once it is upon us, we will hear and see only what the Empire desires."

"My family serves that Empire, Chief. My brother died fighting for it, too," she reminded him. "You'd better not let others hear you speak like this. They might suspect you were the one who stole those--" she stopped mid-sentence, sitting up abruptly, and leaned over the holo gameboard.

Kaileel eyed her, then thoughtfully swirled the reddish liqueur in his own glass.

"You gave those blasters to Rebels on Mantooine?" she asked quietly. "Was *that* the business you had to attend to?"

Before the Chief could answer, Dap Nechel bounded into the room.

"Why didn't you tell me you were playing?" he asked, his voice filled with an exaggerated anguish.

Celia fell back onto the overstuffed pillows. She looked from Kaileel to Dap, then turned away. Kaileel straightened in his seat and took a long slow sip from his drink.

"I'm sorry," Dap said. "I seem to have interrupted a private conversation. I'll go now."

"No, it's okay, Dap," Celia said. "Stay. We were just setting up the board." She pressed a button on the side of the game table. A greenish glow lit their faces and a dozen warriors appeared, standing at attention, weapons held at right-shoulder arms, on each side of the holo board.

"Celia, we don't have to play--" Kaileel began.

"It's all right, Chief," she said. "Your move."

As Dap climbed onto the sofa next to Celia, Kaileel positioned his warroot. Celia moved one of her farangs. Chief countered by advancing another one his warriors.

Celia studied the gameboard. Sitting up, she pulled her blaster from its holster and rubbed her hand along the barrel contemplatively. "Hmm, Chief," she said, "that was not a wise move."

"Really? I believe it all depends on your point of view," he replied.

"My point of view?" she frowned.

"Open your eyes, dear Crimson. Look at what is happening all around you."

Dap eyed his two friends. "What are you two talking about?" he asked. "Will one of you please tell me?"

Celia looked away.

"Celia's brother was killed by Rebels on Ralltiir."

"Oh, dear. That's terrible, Lieutenant. I had heard about the insurrection there on the holo newsvid. But the Empire is dealing with those Rebels," he said.

"And the ones on Alderaan. Yes, indeed. They won't be giving the Empire any more trouble."

"Alderaan?" the Chief asked.

"Good skies, have you not heard the news -- well, no, I guess not if you've been sitting here the last hour."

"What has happened on Alderaan?" Celia repeated.

"The Emperor's servants discovered that several of the leaders of the Rebellion were from Alderaan -- Bail Organa himself, and his daughter, the *Princess* Leia. Our forces have made an example of that world."

"What do you mean?"

"Alderaan has been destroyed."

"What!" Celia exclaimed.

Kaileel shook his head sadly. "Did I not tell you this?"

"The whole planet?"

"It's nothing but billions of particles of dust now," Dap said. "Millions of people, like pawns," Kaileel said, pointing at the characters on their gameboard, "for the Emperor to do with what he will."

"But, Chief--"

"I fear the game is up," Kaileel said softly.

Frowning, Celia leaned over the gameboard to check their warriors' positions. "You're not giving up that easily," she said, suddenly catching Dap's startled expression out of the corner of her eye.

Chief Kaileel exhaled deeply, letting out a big sigh. Celia looked up. Two stormtroopers had blaster rifles aimed at her friend.

"Indeed, Rebel spy," Adion Lang's voice rang out menacingly. He stepped out from behind the stormtroopers. "The game is up."

"Adion!" Celia exclaimed, carefully holstering her blaster. "What's the meaning of this?" She made a point of standing slowly, not wanting to alarm the stormtroopers. "Chief Kaileel is no spy."

"Please, Celia, don't try to defend this traitor. We know all about this," he paused, searching for the right description, "creature's activities. We have proof that he has supplied weapons to Rebel agents on Mantooine. And considering the conversation I've just overheard--"

"You've been spying on us!" Dap exclaimed.

"That is my job. I'm sorry, Celia, that this... thing... has cultivated your friendship. Just remember what his friends have done to your brother," Adion said. "Raine would still be alive if it weren't for traitors like him."

His cold words cut into Celia's heart like a vibroblade. She'd lost her brother to the Rebels. And now she was losing her best friend to the Empire. She looked at Kaileel -- she would never blame him for Raine's death. She hoped he could see that in her eyes.

"It's all right, dear Crimson," Kaileel told her. "I am only one. But the Empire will soon learn that the ones will multiply by the hundreds of thousands. And one day, we shall not be put down."

"Take him away," Adion ordered the stormtroopers.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," Dap said. "If you'll not be needing me, may I go?"

"Yes, Chief Nechel," Adion told him, "though I may ask for a statement from you later."

"I see," Dap replied. "Yes, indeed, whatever you require. You know where I'll be."

Celia watched them put binders on Kaileel's wrists. His strong muscular arms twitched nervously as he stood up. Towering above them, he would have been an intimidating sight if it weren't for the blaster rifles they had trained on him.

"Move it," one stormtrooper ordered Kaileel, shoving his rifle into the chief's chest.

"Take him to ship's security and keep a close eye on him, Sergeant," Adion ordered. "Remember, he knows that place better than anyone on this ship."

"Yes, sir."

As they led Kaileel away, Celia stared after them. "What will happen to him, Adion?"

"Dear Celia, don't concern yourself with these details," he replied, reaching out to take her hand.

"I don't understand this, Adion. I thought you were an administrative aide."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry I had to lie to you, Celia. I'm with the Imperial Security Bureau. We've been watching your security chief for several months now."

"I thought I knew him so well. I never suspected--" she said, covering her face with her hands.

Adion took Celia into his arms. "There, now," he said, "everything will be all right. Come, sit down with me."

"Gentlebeings," a voice rang out over the ship's intercom. "This is Captain Glidrick. In approximately 30 minutes, the *Kuari Princess* will emerge from hyperspace to enter the Maelstrom Nebula. You won't want to miss the spectacular view from the Lido Deck's observation ports. It will be a sight you will never forget."

"The Nebula--" Celia sighed. Kaileel's comparison of the Empire and the nebula filled her mind ... *until it touches you, you may not realize the danger it presents.*

"Forget what that old creature said to you, Celia. His thoughts are dangerous."

Celia looked up into Adion's blue eyes. They seemed cold and vacant. Who was right? Empire? Rebel? She'd been hurt by both of them. Could she ever embrace one or the other? She didn't know what to think anymore. "I've got to talk to him, Adion."

"That's not a good idea, Celia."

"Please -- just for a few minutes."

"I will have to question him first, but before we reach Aris I'll let you see him."

Nodding weakly, she rested her head on Adion's shoulder.

* * *

The cell door slid shut behind her. Celia stood rigidly, staring at Kaileel. After more than 10 hours, she was finally able to talk to him, just as Adion Lang had promised.

Shaking her head, she placed her nav-aid datapads on the chest just inside the door and began pacing back and forth across Kaileel's cell. Her hand nervously fingered her empty holster.

"You admitted it!" she finally shouted at Kaileel.

"What else was I to do, Lieutenant?" he asked her.

Stopping dead in her tracks in front of him, Celia rolled her eyes in disgust.

"Lie!"

Kaileel stared past her as if looking out some nonexistent viewport. "To what end? My dear little Crimson," he said, turning to look into her eyes, "I know you are not that naive."

Celia clenched her fists and pounded Kaileel's muscular chest. "I just don't understand, Chief!" she cried. "What has the Empire done to you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why did you get yourself mixed up with these Rebels?"

"What the Empire is doing is wrong," he told her, "it's immoral. Remember what I told you -- that certain point of view -- stop looking at the Empire from a distance. Take a look up close, Celia. You will see. All freedom-loving beings know this is true." He took her hand into his, pressing it closely to his chest. "And I know, deep in my heart, that one day you will understand."

Staring up into his huge black eyes, Celia pushed down the lump in her throat.

"I just don't know, Chief--"

The door into the cell slid open.

"Time's up, Lieutenant. I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

"But it's only been a couple of minutes. Can't I stay a little while longer, Sergeant?"

"I've got my orders, Lieutenant."

The stormtrooper motioned her toward the door. Celia frowned at Kaileel. She finally walked away from him, stopping to glance back one last time.

"I still want my rematch with you, Chief!" she told him, reaching for the datapads on the chest. "I won't let them take you off this ship until I get a rematch!"

The datapads slipped from Celia's hands, clattering to the floor. She bent down to retrieve them, inconspicuously withdrawing the knife from her boot. Standing abruptly, she drove the knife under the stormtrooper's helmet and into his neck. He screamed in pain as she forcefully pulled him out of the doorway, bashing his head against the wall. Her hands shaking, she twisted the blade one last time as the trooper collapsed to the floor.

"C'mon, Chief," she said, re-sheathing the knife in her boot, "we've got to get out of here!"

A second stormtrooper appeared in the doorway. Diving to the floor, Celia recovered the fallen trooper's blaster rifle and opened fire. Her shot nicked the wall as the stormtrooper backed away from the door. Jumping to her feet, Celia scrambled to the doorway and blasted him as he ran down the corridor.

"Let's go, Chief!" she shouted, throwing the blaster rifle back to him.

Following her, Kaileel stepped over the two dead stormtroopers. "Tell me, dear Crimson, do you really expect us to get out of here alive?" he asked. "Where's the rest of our security people?"

"Dap arranged for a little problem on the Bazaar Deck," she said, retrieving the second blaster rifle.

"Good old Dap. You think the turbolift's the best way down to the hangar bay?"

"Should be all clear, Chief."

"Amazing."

"You've got a lot of friends on board the *Princess*, old man!"

"Is there a barge--"

"Already prepped. I disconnected the robot pilot and did a little rewire job so I could fly it out of here."

"And into the Maelstrom," the Chief added. "We'll be safe there."

Thirty seconds later the turbolift doors opened onto the luxury liner's dimly lit hangar. Two barges which were used for piloting passengers to and from the

ship occupied the high-ceilinged room. Peering into the bay, Celia motioned for Kaileel to follow her.

They were halfway across the bay when Adion Lang walked down the ramp of the nearest barge. His blaster was pointed toward Chief Kaileel, but his eyes were transfixed on Celia.

"Put your blasters down," he ordered them.

Celia stared at the blaster in her hand. "Adion, please," she said, her voice trembling, "let Kaileel go."

"I was afraid you'd try something like this, Celia. You always were rather impetuous. But I think you know I can't let him go," he told her. "Now, please, put your blaster down. You don't want to kill me."

Celia searched Adion's eyes. There was no emotion there, no spark of life. It can't end like this, she thought. *There's got to be something I can do.*

Chief Kaileel moved slowly to lower his blaster. "I'm sorry, little Crimson," he said, suddenly jerking the rifle up to fire at Adion. His first shot went wide. Half a heartbeat later, a blast from Adion's rifle caught him across the chest. Kaileel managed to get off a second shot, but it ricocheted wildly, bouncing off the hull of the barge. Kaileel collapsed, mortally wounded, onto the cold metallic floor of the hangar bay.

Celia dropped her blaster rifle and rushed toward her fallen friend. "You didn't have to kill him!" she screamed at Adion. Tears threatened to blur her vision. But she forced them away as she knelt beside Kaileel's body.

Adion approached her cautiously, kicking both blaster rifles across the hangar floor. "Why, Celia? Why were you helping him escape?" he asked her. "You're no Rebel."

"He was my friend," she said quietly, ignoring the contempt she heard in Adion's voice. She wondered what had happened to the young man she'd once admired, the man she had loved.

"You'll have to come with me, Celia," Adion said.

"Don't make me, Adion," she told him, her eyes still fixed on Kaileel's body for fear they might betray her true feelings. "Won't you let me leave?"

"It's my duty, Celia," he said coldly, his blaster trained on the back of her head. "You're under arrest for treasonous acts against the Empire."

Celia picked up Kaileel's limp hand, tenderly running her fingers across it. "Looks like this game's going nowhere, Chief," she told him. "How will I ever get my rematch?"

Adion moved a step closer, his tall frame casting a dark shadow across Kaileel's face. His leg brushed up against Celia's back and she cringed at his touch.

"Get up, Celia."

A tear trickled down her cheek. Slowly, she turned and looked back at Adion. Her hand slipped unnoticeably toward her boot. Her fingers clamped around the handle of the knife.

"Get up," Adion repeated, grabbing her left arm, dragging her up so that their faces were barely centimeters apart. He shook his head, and for one brief moment Celia thought she detected a hint of regret. Then his blue eyes narrowed. Blinded by his own hatred, Adion never noticed the flash of steel until Celia slashed him across the arm.

His eyes grew wild as he cried out in pain. The blaster slipped from his hand and skittered across the floor as Celia lashed out again. Trying to protect himself from the attack, Adion lost his grip on her. She fled across the hangar and up the ramp of the barge.

As the hatch slid shut she could hear Adion shouting her name. "Celia, don't do this!"

Seconds later, the barge lifted off the floor of the hangar bay. The small transport slipped quietly outside into the swirling Maelstrom Nebula.

From the viewport, Celia watched the *Kuari Princess* fade as the barge moved away from the luxury liner and deeper into the nebula.

"Stalemate, Chief," she nodded to herself. A bitterness crept into her voice. "Nobody wins this round."

35:3:14/HER/G76R/LAZ.4.LAR/TRD

Kira Run Opening Up to Mainstream Trade

Lazeria, Lazerian IV

It has been several decades now since the Haik expedition blazed a reliable hyperlane through the Kira system, linking the Harrin Trade Corridor with the Enarc Run. Up until now, the hazardous Run has been seen as a route only for the daring and reckless. Independent traders, hungrier and more desperate for income than larger concerns, have for years braved the uncertainty of the route, reaping the rewards of a successful run, and occasionally paying the price of an unsuccessful one.

Of late, however, several small shipping companies have committed to servicing the Kira Run, bringing it into the community of established trade routes. Should the large megacorporations likewise determine that the Kira Run is a safe venture, the region may soon experience a robust surge in trade activity, making it an ideal location for support industries and concerns. Indeed, many speculators are now forecasting an explosion in the economies of the Lazerian and Ropagi systems, which serve as the endpoints of the Kira Run.

Herglic Trading Journal, Basic Edition

**35:4:2/DSN/T11R/ESS.3.CAR/ECO/
D.Mipps**

Ralltiir Blockade Impacting Sector Economy

Camalar, Esseles

The Imperial blockade sealing the Ralltiir system to cargo transports is beginning to take its toll on the Darpa sector. The economic impact is already being felt both here on Esseles and in other nearby systems linked to Ralltiir via the Perlemian Trade Route, as interstellar trade grinds to a halt and millions of vessels are turned back at the blockade perimeter.

The cessation of trade along the Corridor is hitting the alien sector of the economy particularly hard, since many of its members work in the transportation industry. Labor organizations are making plans to open support networks to help disadvantaged members.

Governor Jander Graff, busily working to replace departing Senator Gabriel Atanna's bureaucracy, has not yet commented on the blockade, though one key official on his transition team stated off the record that the Governor hopes to have normalized trade relations to Ralltiir restored within a month.

By Deena Mipps, Darpa SectorNet

Force Commander: Crisis On Sarapin

"They must be dealt with swiftly. I want those energy collection farms garrisoned and any Rebels in the area eliminated."

—Grand General Malcor Brashin to Commander Brenn Tantor

Brashin rushed to Sarapin with Commander Brenn Tantor, his trainee. Tantor led the Imperial forces on Sarapin's volcanic surface. After establishing a beachhead and weathering an initial Rebel attack, Tantor's forces quickly took a nearby energy collector. However, with the Rebels driven from it, the collector shut down. Brenn was forced to send his brother Dellis, a skilled slicer, to slice through the Rebel codes and restart the facility. The same procedure was required for the other four collectors in the area.

Once Tantor had taken all the collectors and destroyed the Rebel bases in the area, however, disaster struck. The Rebels had also captured a nearby drilling platform, of which they had lost control. The drill was overheating and causing seismic disturbances, one of which resulted in a volcanic eruption that destroyed one of the collectors Tantor had retaken.

Alerted to the threat, Brenn considered simply destroying the drill before Dellis convinced him that he could slice into the drill and shut it down, saving the Empire's investment, if Brenn could punch through the Alliance forces to get him there. Brenn obliged, retaking the drill and inserting Dellis to shut it down before groundquakes destroyed the vital energy collectors of Sarapin. He then followed up by bombarding the final Rebel position on Sarapin, removing the Rebel presence from Sarapin entirely.

At the battle's conclusion, Brashin promoted Brenn Tantor to Major after delivering the news of the Death Star's destruction at the hands of the Rebels.

35:4:22/NEO/G76D/COR.1.IPC/MIL/
A.Jarvis

Tarkin, Staff Die in Tragic Shuttle Crash

Imperial City, Coruscant

A long career in service to the citizens of the galaxy came to an abrupt end yesterday when Grand Moff Tarkin and several key aides died in a fiery shuttle crash while on final approach to the docking array at the Tallaan Imperial Shipyards. Tarkin had been returning from one of his periodic inspections of the Outer Rim fleets, and had been joined for the final leg of the trip by Admiral Motti, General Tagge and their staffs.

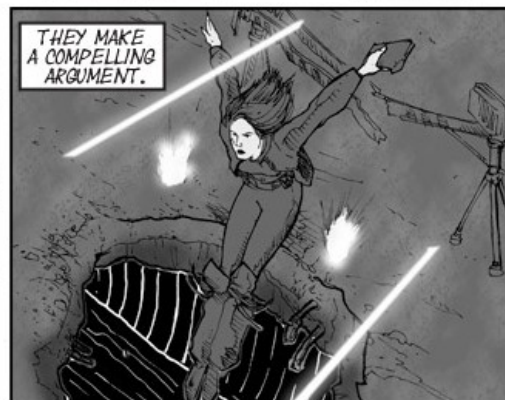
Tarkin was an early ally of then-Senator Palpatine, and championed Palpatine's New Order vision at every opportunity before the Senate of the Old Republic. He served for years as governor of Seswenna Sector, and it was then that he developed his philosophy of administration now known as the Tarkin Doctrine. Tarkin will be remembered as a man who devoted his entire being to the Empire and Emperor that he loved more than life itself.

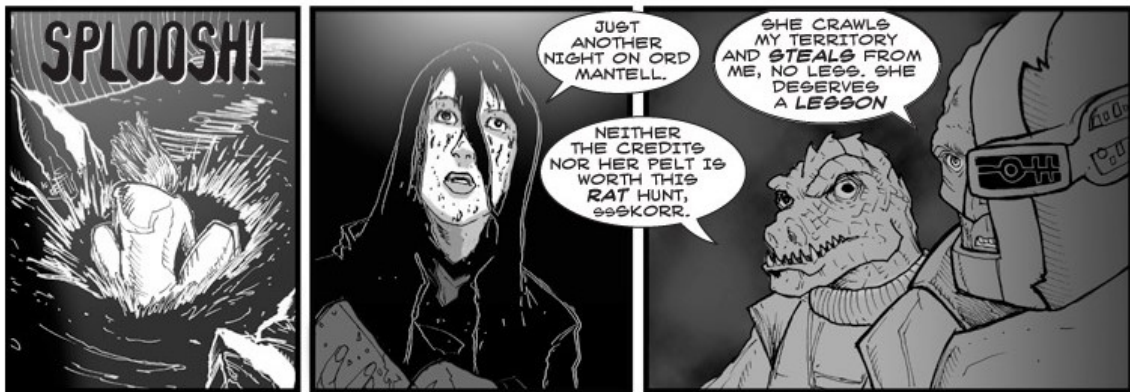
Inspectors have ruled the shuttle crash an accident. At fault was a defective computer module which malfunctioned, leading to an onboard overload spiral. Tarkin is survived by his niece.

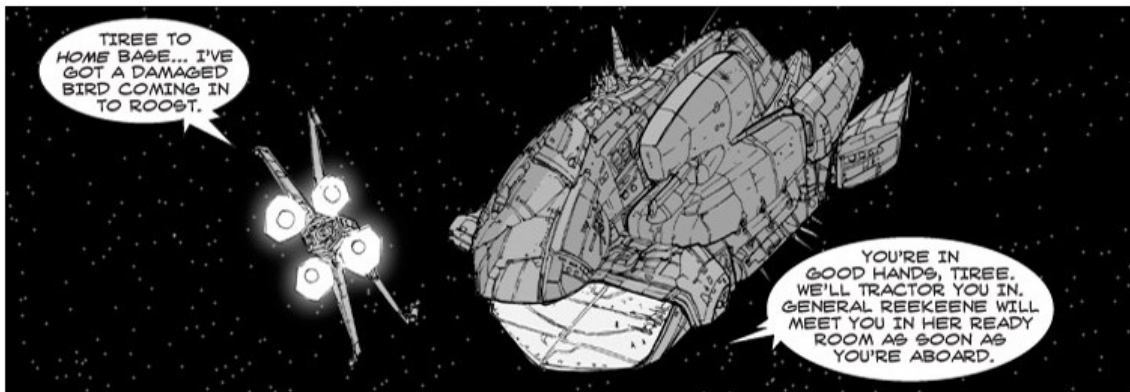
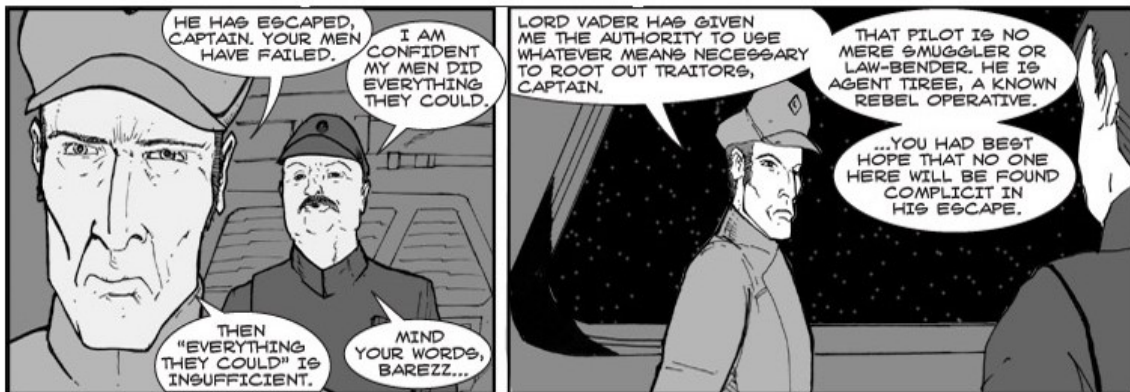
By Alendar Jarvis, *New Order Progressive*



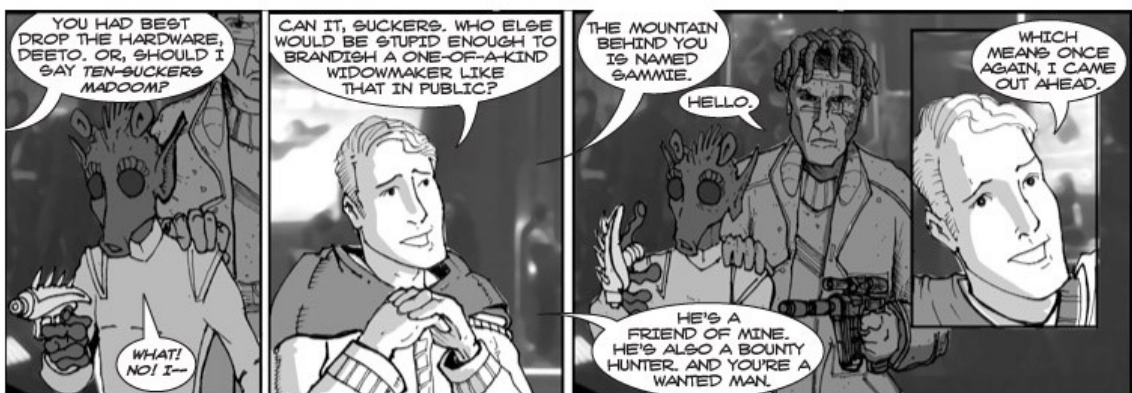
YOU KNOW WHAT HUNT'S YOU...

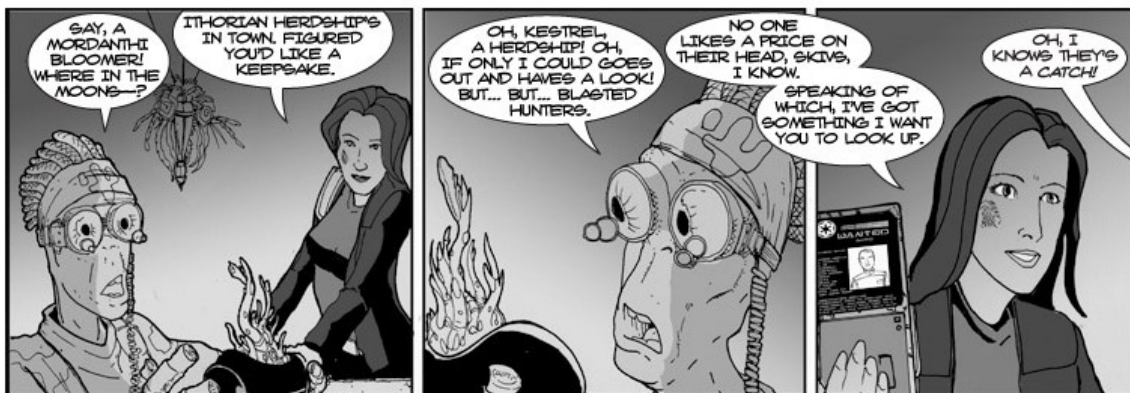


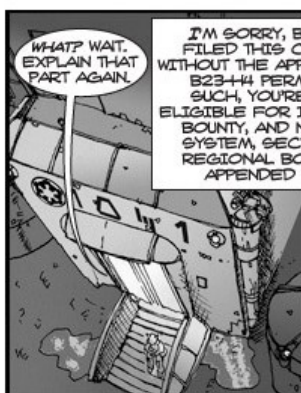
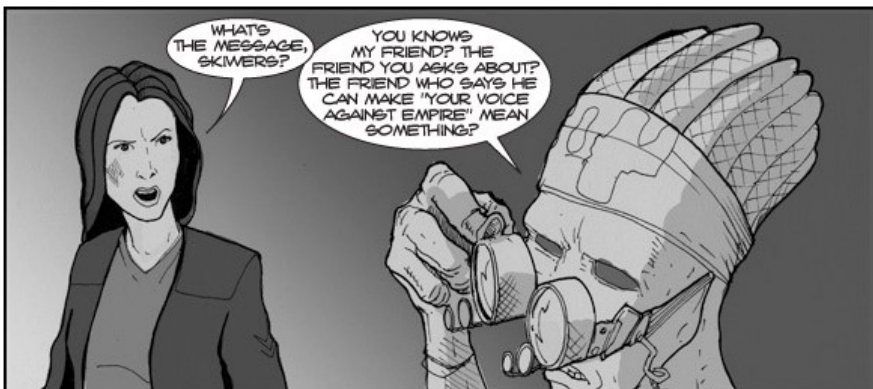


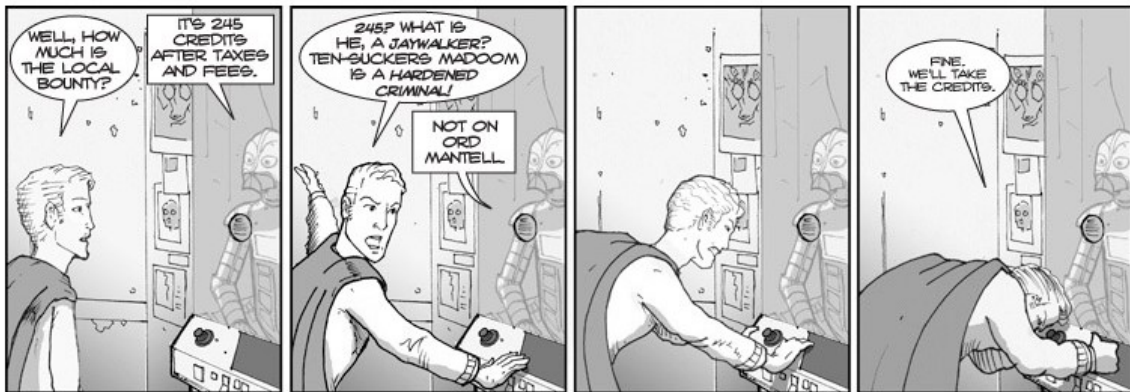


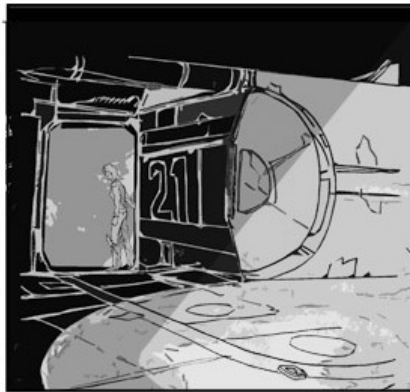


















ALL RIGHT, SHE'S WARMING UP.



YOU'RE A LAWMAN, SAMMIE. THIS REALLY ISN'T YOUR STYLE.

DON'T MAKE ME GAG YOU, RAAL. YOU DON'T NEED YOUR MOUTH TO FLY.

OOH! DO IT ANYWAY!

MMFFF
MMFFF/MF!



SHUT UP, SMILEY.

HERE ARE THE SPECS. THE ASTROGATION DATA IS ON THIS 'PAD.



SAMMIE. THIS IS WHERE YOU WANT TO GO? IT'S A LONG HAUL... AND WE'VE GOT A PROBLEM.

I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH POWER TO GET US THERE.



WELL, LOOKS LIKE THE TRIP'S CANCELED. LET'S GET SOME DRINKS.

SIT DOWN.

THAT'S NOT A PROBLEM. LEAVE IT TO ME!



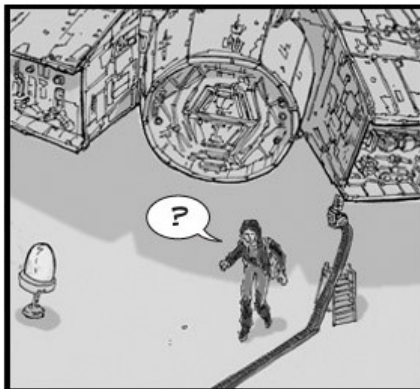
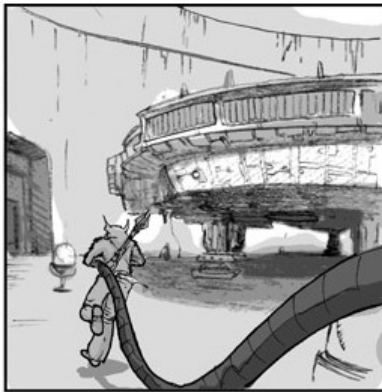
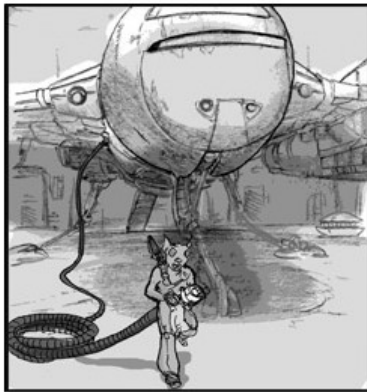
YES, OFFICER. I ASSURE YOU YOUR VISIT WILL BE WORTHWHILE.

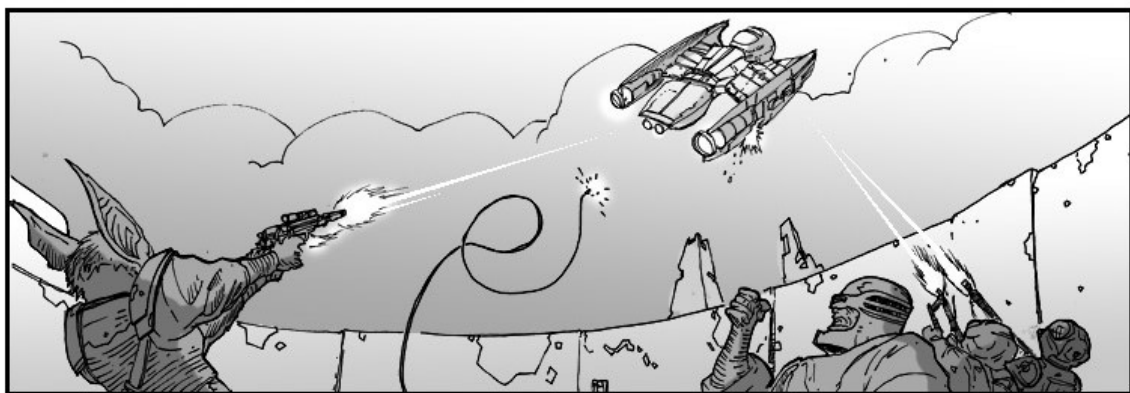


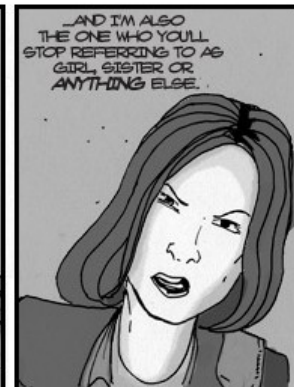
I HAVE TRACKED DOWN MY SUSPECT TO A DOCKING BAY. THESE REBELS WON'T ESCAPE ME.



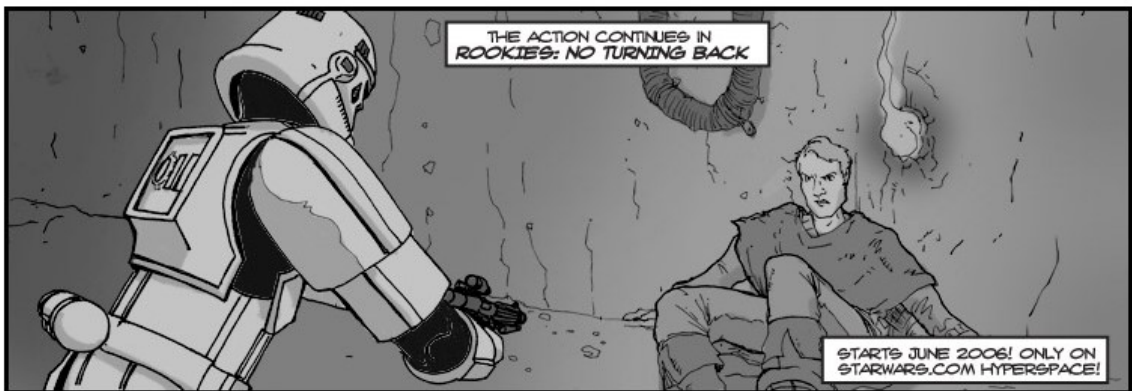
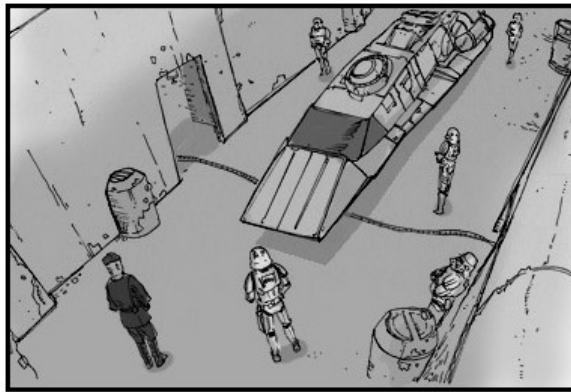
I HAVE INVITED SEVERAL COLLEAGUES TO ASSIST IN THE CAPTURE...









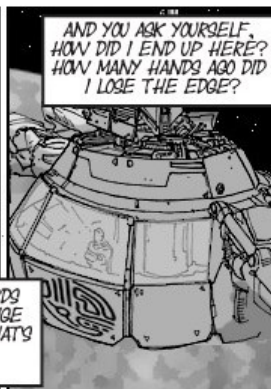
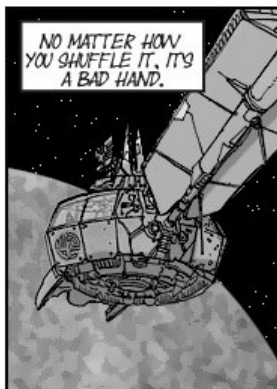
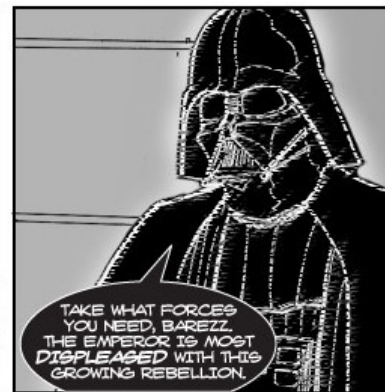
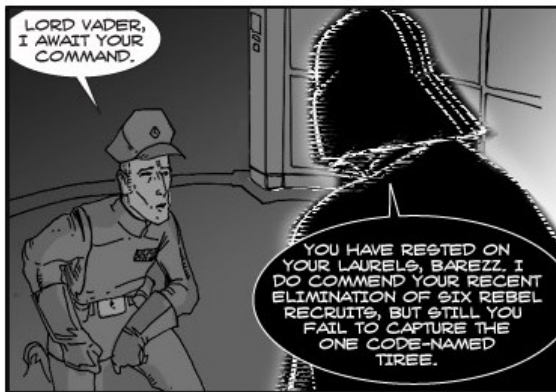




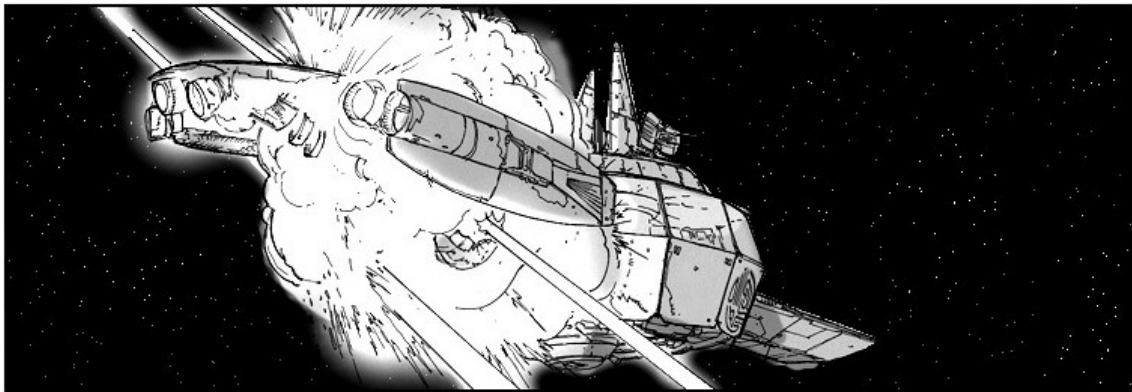
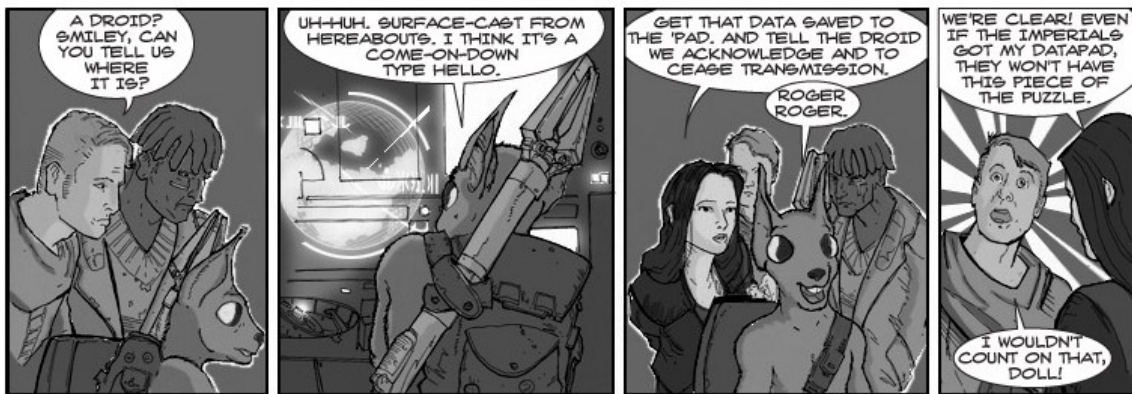
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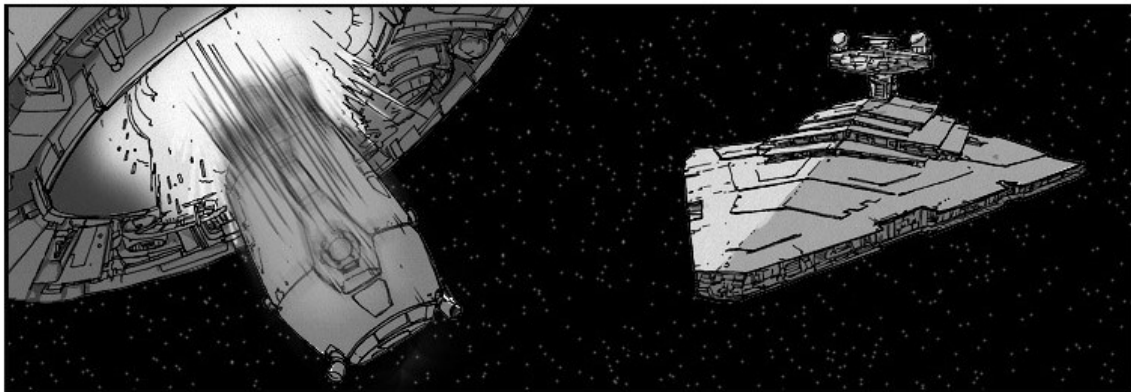
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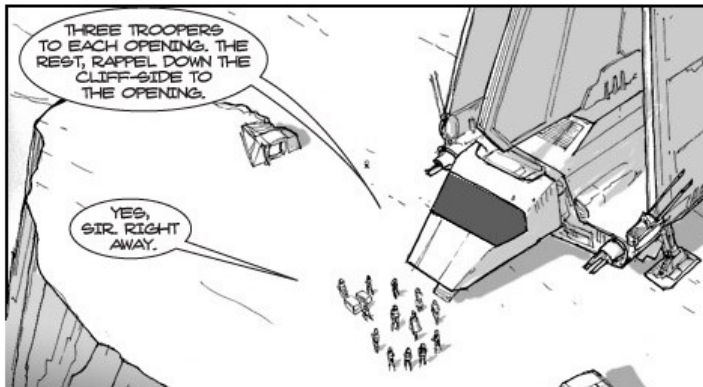








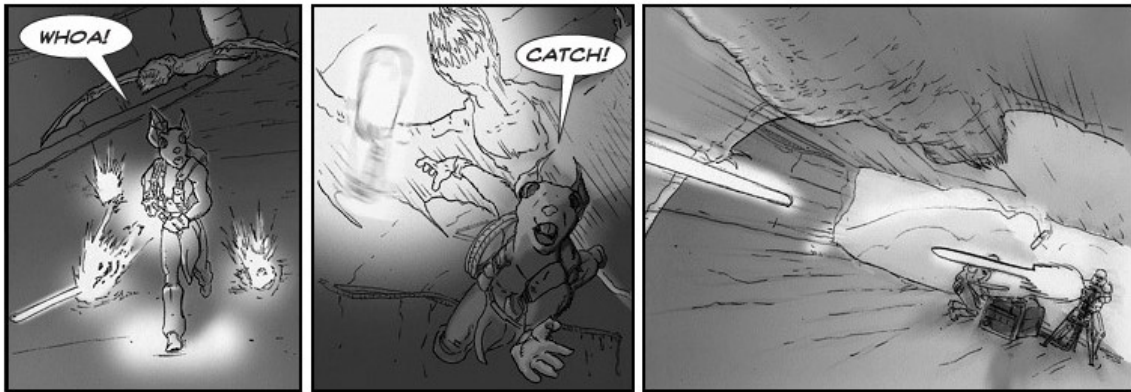
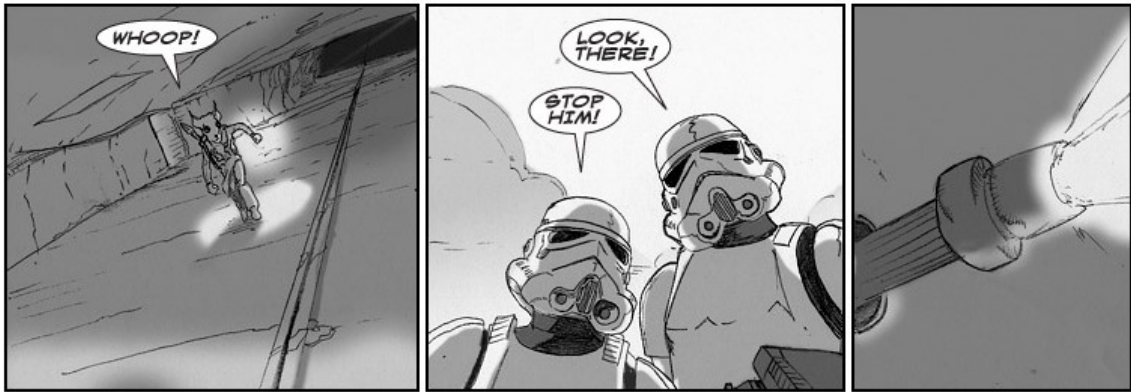


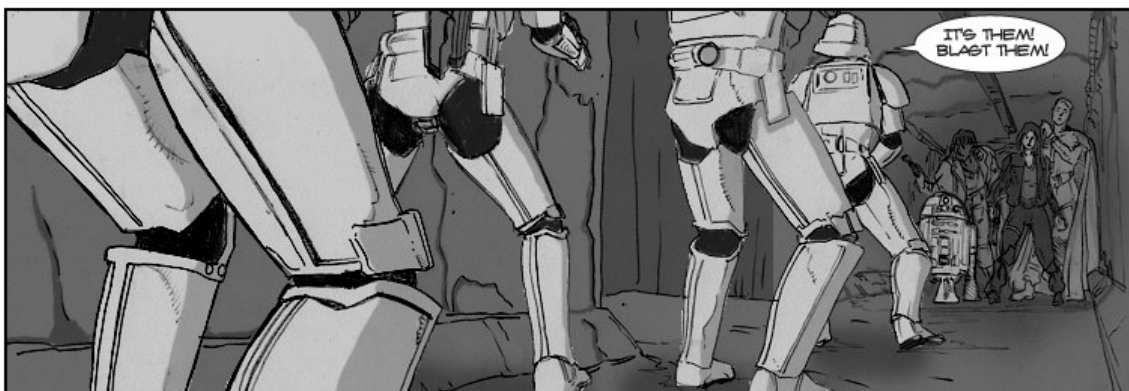
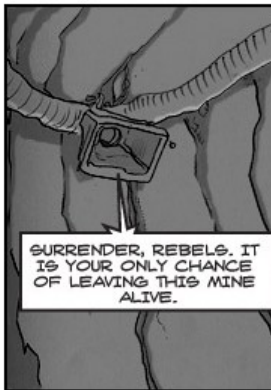
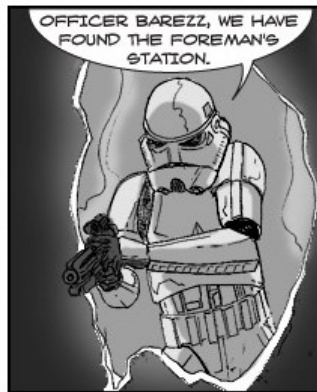




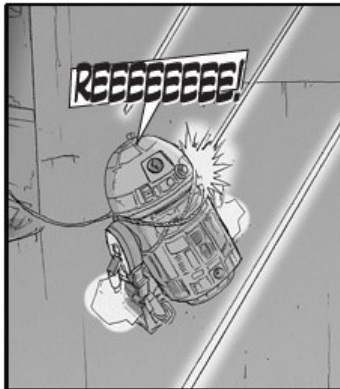
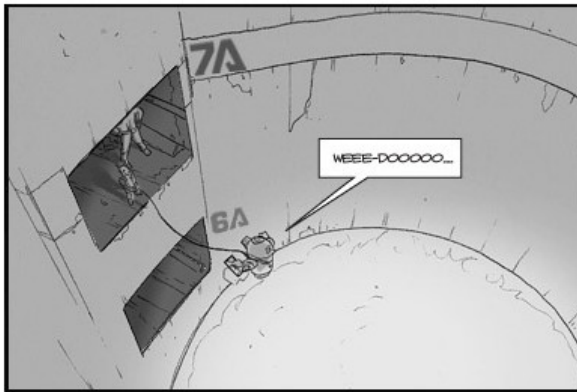
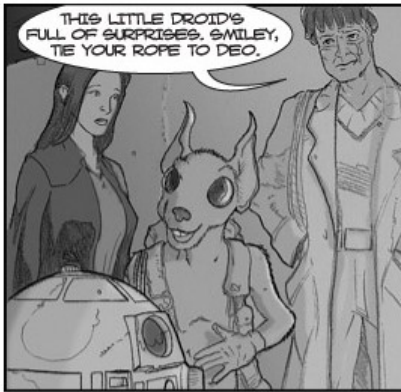
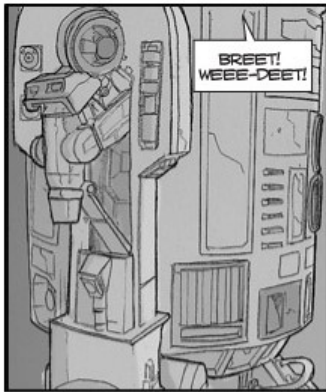


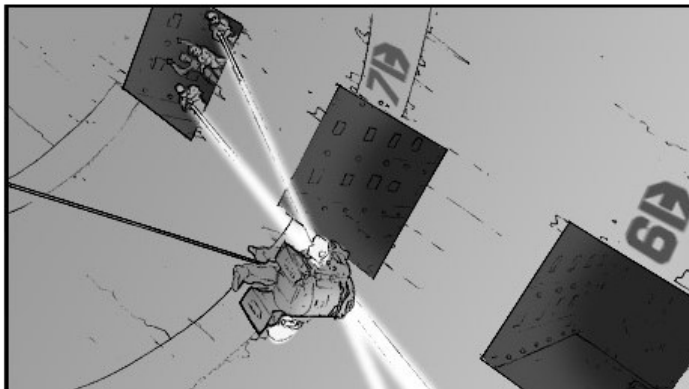
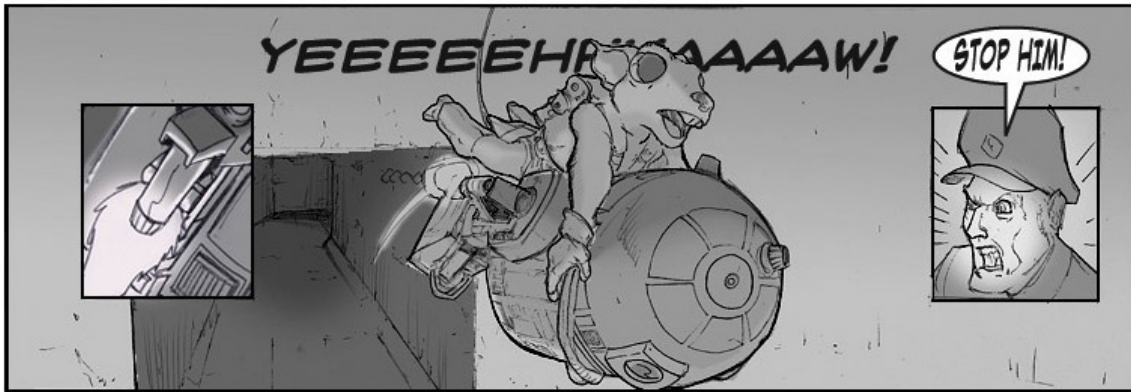
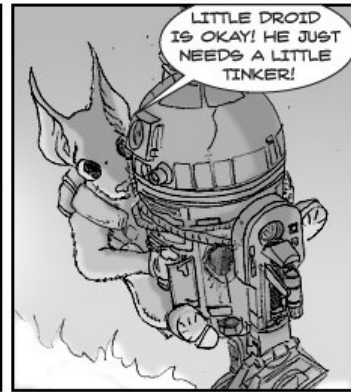


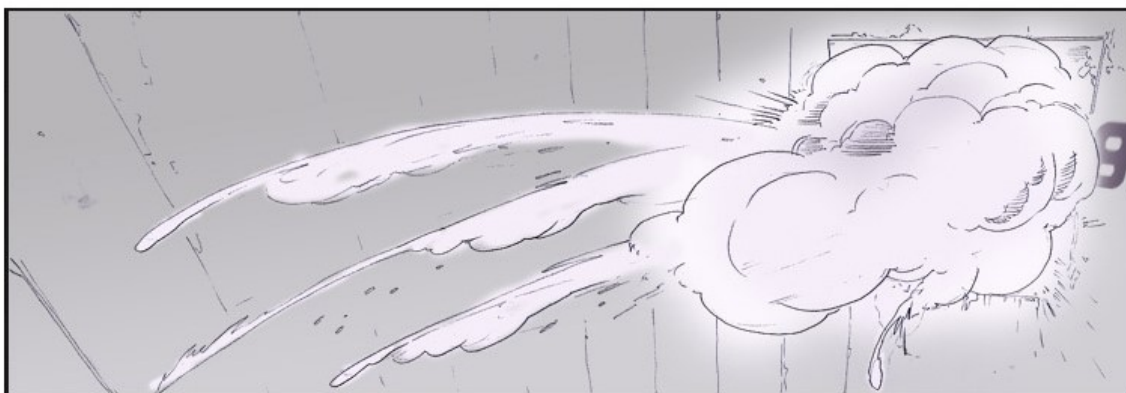




















Priority X

She wasn't out of hyperspace for more than a few minutes when the incoming-message indicator buzzed. She took in a steadying breath -- her body was still recovering from her narrow escape of Ulicia just a half hour earlier -- and then hit the comm display:

MESSAGE FOR: Hart-and-Parn Gorra-Fiolla of Lorrd
SECTION: Office of the Auditor-General

FROM: Akeeli Somerce, First Assistant to the Prex
SECTION: Office of the Prex, Chils Meplin
REGARDING: New Assignment
PRIORITY: X/Class A Infraction

The use of her full name immediately set her off, but the source and priority of the message had grabbed her attention, relegating the peeve to the back of her mind.

"Priority X?" she found herself saying out loud. *From the Office of the Prex?* Something about the header itself unsettled her-made her outright anxious, in fact.

She delved into the body of the message. It took her a few moments to read to the end, at which point she could do nothing but stare at the screen, hoping she was hallucinating. According to the Prex's informants, the Rebels had just destroyed the Empire's Death Star battle station near the Yavin star system. And because the Corporate Sector Authority had an Imperial charter, anything that affected the Empire affected the CSA, as well.

The message indicated that one rumor placed the fleeing band of insurgents in the Abo Dreth system, which was within Corporate Sector borders. The Prex wanted her to verify that information -- immediately.

Normally, she didn't need much time to prepare for an assignment. But in this case she was low on fuel, almost out of power cells for her blaster and still in possession of the prisoner she'd just "liberated" from Commex's headquarters. She couldn't just turn around now and head off on another case...

Except for the fact that the assignment came from the Office of the Prex and was classified Priority X, which essentially left her no choice. Without further debate, she punched the designated coordinates for Abo Dreth into the navicomputer and then left the astrogation software to calculate the precise vectors as she headed aft to take care of her prisoner, who was currently bound to one of the ship's bulkheads.

Naven Crel looked up as she entered the passenger area. "Priority X, huh? Sounds important."

"Give me a break, Crel. You don't even know what that means."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Don't you have other things to worry about? Industrial sabotage is a Class B infraction, you know. If the Prex hadn't ordered me to get you out of there,

Commex would've ended your life without a second thought. In a few days you'll be on trial before the entire Direx board -- maybe you should start coming up with a plan."

She gave his binders a hard yank, eliciting a yelp from Crel. "That should hold you for a while." She returned to the cockpit, ignoring the curses Crel was muttering under his breath. A light on the control board indicated that the navicomputer had completed the hyperspace calculations. She strapped herself into the flight chair and pulled the three lightspeed levers backward. With a slight jolt, the *Tydia Rish* leaped into hyperspace.

She checked the ship's status indicators. All normal. According to the navicomputer, the trip would take less than 45 minutes -- enough time to catch a quick nap. Although she hated being asleep at the helm, she'd been up for 30 hours already, so even a short rest would do wonders --she hoped.

As she succumbed to her exhaustion, one last thought wound its way through her mind: *Besides, what could possibly go wrong?*

She awoke with a start. Before she could even focus, she felt something cold pressed against the side of her neck.

"How *this* for a plan?" Crel said, dropping into a hearty laugh that defied his slim stature.

Fiolla straightened up in her chair as she regained her bearings. Crel stood to her right, his finger on the blaster trigger -- *her* blaster, she realized. She looked up, straight into his eyes. "You're not serious?"

"Pretty serious. And what're you going to do about it?"

As she slid down in her seat, she said, "This," and then kicked the lightspeed levers forward, immediately dropping the ship back into realspace. As he glanced over to see what she had just done, she grabbed the throttle and initiated the reverse thrusters.

Crel's inertia slammed him into the control board, and the blaster flew from his hand. A half second later, Fiolla unclicked her seat restraints, jumped up and

just as Crel turned back around -- punched him solidly on the chin. He fell to the deckplates in a heap.

"I like my plan better," she said, flexing her bruised hand so it wouldn't stiffen as the muscles repaired themselves.

Fifteen minutes later she had him bound again -- this time wrists *and* ankles -- and strapped into the seat next to hers. The chronometer counted down the last few seconds to her destination, and then the *Tydia Rish* decelerated into realspace.

Fiolla looked out the viewport onto Abo Dreth -- a large, dark brown world dotted with hundreds of silver lakes. The thin lines of rivers wandered across the planet's face in no particular pattern, and a few gray cloud banks drifted across the equatorial region. The automatic sensors showed meager life signs, higher than normal levels of radioactivity and a nitrogen-heavy atmosphere. "Perfect place for a hideout, I guess."

She set the sensors to scan mode, searching for any humanoid life forms. Less than a minute later, she had something -- a blip on the western edge of the smallest continent. She grabbed the control yoke and dove for the surface.

She pulled Crel up to the edge of a bluff. She couldn't leave him behind -- she hadn't even figured out how he'd escaped the first time. She checked his breath mask to make sure it was properly sealed and then returned to her surveillance.

She made one pass across the wide wasteland with her naked eye and then, finding nothing, gave the macrobinoculars a try.

Still nothing.

No... wait.

About three kilometers off sat an object that gleamed in the light of the system's yellow sun.

"It's a Corellian StarRunner," came a woman's voice from behind her.

Fiolla spun around, accidentally knocking Crel to the ground. The human woman before her wore standard spacer's clothing and a breath mask and had a sporting blaster trained on Fiolla.

"Who are you?" Fiolla asked.

The woman moved closer. "My ship... it's a Corellian StarRunner. Not even on the market yet."

Fiolla squinted against the harsh midday sunlight. The woman definitely looked familiar. "You planning using that thing?" she asked, eyeing the blaster.

"This?" she said in a lilting timbre. "Of course."

"All right, what do you want? I've got some supplies on my ship, a few credits, a couple of expended power cells. Any of that sound good to you?" Next to her, Crel finally struggled back to his feet.

"No," she said as she continued to move closer. "I'm not interested in any of that."

"Then what?"

She gave a smile that Fiolla didn't find at all endearing. "I'm here for you.

Time for a different tack. "Do you realize who I am?"

"Oh, most certainly... Fiolla of Lorr. In fact, I've been waiting for you. You're late."

"Yeah, well, I had some... passenger trouble."

The woman stopped a few meters from Fiolla and Crel, and leveled her blaster at Fiolla's chest.

Fiolla swallowed and glanced at her own blaster in the holster at her hip.

"Try it," the woman said. Fiolla knew better than to go for the blaster while her adversary was focused on it -- especially when her hand was still a bit stiff from punching Crel. She needed a distraction to give her that extra moment.

"I'm sure my boss will wish he'd been here to see this," the woman said. "But he's got more important matters to deal with."

"Who's your boss?"

"Haven't figured it out yet? I'm shocked. You just infiltrated one of his corporate headquarters not three hours ago."

"Commex? You work for Erdin Giblo?"

"Hardly. I report to the head of the super-corp that owns Commex."

Fiolla suddenly wondered how this woman could have even known about her last assignment. There were only two people who had access to that information -- the Prex himself, Chils Meplin, and his assistant. She looked into the woman's eyes. "Akeeli Somerce."

"Very good, my ex-Auditor-General. The Prex has decided that you and your friend here know too much."

"So the rumor about the Rebels?"

"Obviously fictitious." Somerce raised the blaster and took careful aim.

In the same moment, Fiolla felt something rub against her side. She glanced down to see Crel's *free* hand edging toward her blaster. Somehow he had managed to slip out of his binders as he was getting back to his feet.

"Wait!" Fiolla said, stalling. "I don't understand. What does the Prex have to do with Commex leaking top-level CSA data to the Empire?"

Somerce stared into her eyes. "I don't think it's any of your business." She pulled the trigger...

And at the same time, Crel yanked the blaster from Fiolla's holster and fired.

Fiolla leaped to the side, hit the ground hard and then rolled, stopping just a meter away. She looked up to see Somerce lying face upward, not moving.

"Thanks, Crel," she said as she stood up. "I owe you one." When she didn't get an answer, she turned to see Crel sprawled across the dusty surface. She rushed over to him and knelt at his side.

"Crel?" As she said his name, she noticed that an ID card had slipped halfway out of an until-now-concealed jacket pocket. She pulled it the rest of the way out and turned it over.

It was an Auditor-General's badge.

Finally the circumstances started to fall into place, forming a twisted plot of sabotage and treason -- and now attempted assassination. Naven Crel had gone undercover to ferret out a traitor against the CSA, and his investigation had lead him to Commex, which was in turn controlled by... the Prex, the second most powerful man in the Corporate Sector.

"Crel?" she said, shaking his shoulder.

His eyes opened -- barely -- and scanned her features as if trying to recognize her. "You were right," he said after a moment. "I was in over my head." As he spoke, his words grew quieter. "Just do me one favor..."

"Anything."

He swallowed with obvious difficulty. "Get... Meplin."

Fiolla watched as Crel exhaled his last breath, and then she put a hand on his chest. She glanced across the surface at Somerce's lifeless body. "Don't worry, my friend. Meplin's days of selling the CSA out to the Empire are over. I stake my life on it."

To Fight Another Day

The tramp freighter Quandary's ruddycheeked second mate pulled off his headset. "Silver Station's under full alert," he exclaimed. "Somebody intends to blow it up in less than a day"

Tinian I'att pushed a strand of red-blond hair behind her left ear. The news sparked no rush of fear, no clench at the pit of her stomach, and that disappointed her. Other people might die, people who had reasons to go on living. It seemed wrong not to care. "Who wants to blow it up?" she asked. "Why?"

Ten days ago, the Quandary had picked up Tinian and her traveling companions at Ksiczzic III. Tinian had never seen poverty before she started running from the Empire. She was getting a fast education. Half of the Quandary's bulkheads braced the other half, and its crew took pitiful pride in mismatched uniforms that she would've been ashamed to wear on the job back at I'att Armament. The second mate had taken a liking to her, although she hadn't encouraged him. He shook his head. "All they told me is that it seems to be a vendetta. Smart saboteurs don't announce their intentions."

"Do we still have to dock there?"

"You bet your sweet... hr'm."

Tinian felt a hand grip her shoulder. That must be Sprig Cheever, the musician who had lent her his wife's ID. Tinian had fled the Druckenwell system with Cheeve's troupe, eluding Imperial troops who wanted the contraband she carried. Cheeve's wife planned to follow as soon as Druckenwell calmed down.

The second mate stepped backward and spoke courteously. "Yes, ma'am. The Quandary's got a weakening hull section. Didn't want to alarm you passengers, but we've got to get repairs here at Silver."

"That's all right." Cheeve, a KeyBed player and songwriter, wore a short, neat goatee. He dropped his hand from Tinian's shoulder and leaned up against a bulkhead.

Tinian didn't mind when Cheeve hovered. She'd always been small for her age, and she'd grown up with bodyguards. Cheeve had kept his distance during their three weeks on the run, letting her cry when she need to cry, telling her stories when she needed to be distracted. At Druckenwell, an Imperial Moff had ripped Tinian's life into pieces and fed them to her. Every hour or two she choked on a memory.

"We've come to talk with Una Poot," Cheeve drawled. Una Poot equipped seven resistance cells in this sector of Imperial space. As soon as Tinian delivered the illicit prototypes she and her musical protectors had smuggled off Druckenwell, she could rest. She'd've fulfilled her last reason to go on.

Intellectually, she knew she must find a new purpose - - but knowing didn't make her care. She'd lost too much.

The second mate raised a sparse eyebrow. "Good luck," he said. "You've got 16 resistance fighters lined up ahead of you to talk to her. And she's real busy right now."

Tinian had met the other passengers. They'd shared tasteless rations in a stale-smelling cargo hold that the crew called its "mess." Her fellow travelers were the last survivors of a decimated underground, trying to join the Rebel Alliance.

"She'll see me." Cheeve stroked his goatee. "She's my father's aunt. I've got a standing invitation."

The second mate's mouth made a small, round "o."

And she'll want what's concealed in our instruments, Tinian predicted.

Besides her alleged husband Cheeve, she was traveling with his fellow musician Yccakic - - a multitalented Bith - - and their droid Redd Metalflake. Biths stood out in a crowd because of their high, hairless craniums, quintuple mouth folds, and long knobby hands. She'd learned on this trip that they perceived sounds as precisely as other species perceived colors, and even called them by color names.

She stared out the freighter's tiny viewport. Across several degrees of arc, a deep, rosy pink aurora outshone the stars. Five dark vortices near its center radiated golden energy pulses that crisscrossed, forming visible waves of dark and light pink, amplifying and muting each other. Tinian wondered what they were.

A black square, in front of the aurora grew and resolved into a cube surrounded by long cylinders joined at haphazard angles. The aurora showed between cylinders, except at the center, where Tinian guessed the original station remained inside its add-ons.

"Silver Station doesn't look like much," muttered Yccakic, "because it isn't. It's not even a good place to hide. I can't imagine why Una Poot headquarters here."

"Inertia," said the second mate. "We'll be docking in oh, about 17 minutes. I think you'll want to strap down."

Tinian followed Cheeve back along the ship's creaky corridor into the six-meter bunk space they'd been allotted. Cheeve and Yccakic had bunked together, gallantly giving Tinian the other barely padded shelf.

She climbed onto it and strapped in. At her feet, deactivated for the trip, lay a large, red, dented metal box mounted on treads. Redd Metalflake was the band's self-contained droid sound system. They'd shut him down in order to pass him off as luggage during this leg of the trip, to avoid theft. Their small lock box wasn't big enough to hold him.

Inside Redd Metalflake and the band's instruments nestled an armload of electronic components that was everything valuable she had left. She'd been an armament heiress. Her late grandfather, Strephan I'att, and her late fiancée, Daye Azur-Jamin (Why can't I remember their faces?), had developed a personal shield generator that could be mounted on stormtrooper armor, making it truly invincible. Moff Eisen Kerioth had ordered her grandparents shot dead, so that he could claim the technology as his own invention (At least I can feel hatred.). Daye had sabotaged the factory and died beneath its debris, rather than let the Empire get away with murder and theft. A rubble-lined crater marked where I'att Armament had stood. Searchers had found no survivors.

She blinked up at the bulging underside of the upper bunk. She must be getting better. She felt like dying most of the time now, instead of all the time. She only wanted to hurt the Empire before she vanished, by giving that armor technology to someone who could produce and use it. Una Poot had been the best bet.

Yccakic's huge, hairless head appeared over the top bunk's edge. Yccakic played a mean Bottom Viol. He was one of the sector's best bass men. "Tinian?"

"Still here," she said.

"Green up, kid. Stay close to Cheeve and me while we're on Silver Station. Okay?"

"Sure." She wished he'd stop worrying about her. She wanted the nightmares to end. She'd dreamed about Daye again last night, trying to warn him to get out of the factory before it exploded. "Yccakic?"

The Bith leaned over again.

"Is Cheeve concerned about the sabotage threat? The... vendetta that crewman told us about?" The band had learned to rely on Cheeve's presentiments. If he predicted trouble, they moved on.

Yccakic's shiny head vanished for a few moments, then reappeared. "He doesn't like it," relayed the Bith, "but he says, `Out here in the galaxy, things aren't always easy.'"

"Isn't that the truth," she muttered.

* * *

A creaking old protocol droid escorted Tinian, Cheeve, Redd, and Yccakic up a cylindrical passage, around a 90-degree gravity anomaly, then left and right, up and down through three more reorientations until Tinian felt hopelessly lost. Silver Station seemed to be a veritable warren with tarnished walls. She'd never seen so many alien species. Creatures gawked as Tinian, Cheever and Yccakic lugged two enormous instrument cases, followed by a boxy red droid. Redd Metalflake propelled himself around left and right turns, but each time gravity changed, his treads malfunctioned. Cheeve had to lift him, turn him, and set him on the new path.

Tinian offered to help.

"Sorry," Cheeve grunted. "He's only got one handle. You've got to stand guard, and Yccakic's got to steady the instruments."

She thrust a hand into her pocket. Cheeve's wife Twilit had lent her most of a wardrobe, including this long shapeless gray vest. Tinian was trying to stay inconspicuous.

At last the protocol droid led them to a hatch. As it extended a manipulator arm, its servomotors protested with a long squeal. "Wait here," it intoned. "You may consider it your bunk room."

Tinian stepped past the droid into the cubicle. Its bulkheads did not curve, so she guessed that she'd finally breached Silver Station's original construction. It smelled old. Because of her years at I'att Armament, Tinian could identify 31 explosives by odor. Here, thankfully, she didn't smell any - - only staleness that came from one corner, as if some creature had nested there.

The station bunk room would have dwarfed their shipboard cubicle, though, and it had a washroom and a meal chute. Yccakic ordered a liquid concentrate. Some Biths had trouble pushing solid food past all those mouth flaps. "Is it good?" Tinian asked.

"Not particularly," admitted the Bith. "But it's cheap."

Tinian sighed. Watching credits took a lot of getting used to. She'd learned to eat nutritious bulk. She longed for a juicy gorss steak, or half a pot of savory likryt stew.

Several hours later, she got up and started pacing.

"Relax," suggested Cheeve. He slouched at the bunk room's narrow table, punching a datapad and tugging his goatee. Tinian guessed he was writing a song. "This could take a while."

"I'd like to get out and explore."

"I don't think that'd be wise," said Cheeve.

"Why not? Are we prisoners?"

"Not exactly. But your credentials, and Yccakic's, are being checked."

Tinian frowned. "My grandparents worked for the Empire. So did I. Will that count against me?"

"Depends. We're all deserters here."

"Don't go all purple on us, Tinian." Yccakic lounged on a bunk. He hadn't moved since he slurped down his meal. "See if you can interface Redd into that information port. We might as well check the Rebel rumor mill."

Redd sat in the corner farthest from that stale smell. "I'm not very good at that kind of thing," he warned as Tinian approached him. "I'm--"

"Get over here," she ordered, trying to sound serious, but she tended to laugh when addressing Redd. He didn't look anything like the shining protocol and line droids she'd once worked with. After she steered him close to the wall port, he extended his data attachment. "Find out about this bomb threat first," she said.

He downloaded silently. After almost a minute, he said, "It sounds serious, Tinian." She didn't panic. Redd was always pessimistic. "Cheeve isn't worried. What's up?"

"I'm not very good at--"

"Redd!" drawled Cheeve. "Just tell us." "Silver Station has Ranats," Redd said.

Tinian blinked at Cheeve. "What are they?"

Cheeve punched a datapad key. "Con Queecon, they call themselves. Big rodents native to the Aralia system. They're nasty - - smart enough to fight but too stupid to understand surrender. It's illegal to arm a Ranat. What are they doing here, Redd?"

"Evidently this Rebel matriarch you're looking for--"

"Una Poot," said Cheeve. "Come on, get with it. Edit function: fewer comments, more data."

"Una Poot found a colony of Ranats pilfering large quantities of station food. She ordered them eradicated. The survivors are out for vengeance."

"But if they blow up the station, they'll kill themselves too," Tinian exclaimed.

"I said they're stupid." Cheeve shrugged and shut down his datapad. "The Empire categorizes Ranats as semi-intelligent. It's legal to kill them in self-defense."

"How lovely." Tinian pushed hair out of her face. "I'll remember that if I'm attacked by one."

"The Imperial military has supposedly been trying to train Ranat mercenaries to send against the Rebel Alliance," interjected Yccakic.

"Uh-oh," said Tinian. "These might be mercenaries?"

"Vermin, more likely." Cheeve cocked an eyebrow. "Redd, give us general grapevine. What's the big story today?"

Redd paused, then said, "The Empire has constructed a huge space station capable of destroying an entire planet. They named it the Death Star. They tested it at Alderaan--"

"Alderaan?" chorused Tinian, Cheeve, and Yccakic. "But that's an enormous population center," Yccakic continued.

"The Empire blew it to boulders," Redd said mournfully. Tinian gasped.

"But," Redd continued, "the Alliance destroyed the Death Star."

"That's better," Tinian exclaimed. She wanted to hear that someone was hitting the Empire. "What kind of explosives did they use?"

"One starfighter pilot got in a lucky shot."

"One?" Tinian breathed. That was no lucky shot. That was almost supernatural. It would've interested Daye...

Startled, she blinked at Redd Metalflake. For a moment, she'd felt excited.

* * *

If Una Poot lost Silver Station to a few lousy Ranats, she'd never forgive herself. It'd serve her right for trying to live and let them live.

She sat down on a tabletop to wait for news. The door of her headquarters room - - a modified galley that suited large groups - - slid shut behind her rag-tag security people as they scattered into the Station. Ever since she'd arrived as a young merchanter, she'd despised uniformed security and everyone else who looked official. Even the few uniformed troops the Rebel Alliance had scraped together gave her the mulligrubs.

Una and her first husband, Drogue, had delivered a tugship cargo of culslon gas to Ord Segra spaceport. They hadn't known that Ord Segra customs exacted seven percent of cargo value in bribe money. They'd refused to pay. Customs officials had shot the Poots' tug tanks full of holes and given chase. She and Drogue had jumped blindly into hyperspace and emerged here. Drogue had died soon afterward, prospecting the Dragonflower Nebula for other valuable gases. He'd taken too many risks...

Una studied her gnarled, spotted hands. There'd been two husbands since, and neither had survived. Now she was aging with Silver Station. Before she made the Final Jump, she wanted to light a few fuses that'd burn long and slow, and explode some day in the Emperor's face.

She glared at the galley door. If those blasted Ranats destroyed Silver, the Monor system would lose a vital shipment of blaster carbines. She ought to be out there hunting Ranats herself, but she couldn't move quickly enough to blast them anymore.

Her comlink buzzed. "What?" she barked. "Did you find them?"

"No. A Sprig Cheever to speak with you, with prior clearance. He has two companions. Their credentials check."

She made a fist and whacked her table. On another occasion, she'd've welcomed young Cheeve. His hot music and his cool attitude peeled years off the calendar. "What does he want?"

"He claims to have something you can use."

Maybe she should've trained a regular defense force, instead of relying on secrecy to protect Silver Station. But nothing lasted forever.

"All right," she grumbled. "Send them up."

* * *

When the hatch slid open, Tinian recognized the protocol droid who had met them at the docks. The same asymmetrical dribble of grease leaked from his mid-chest restraining bolt. "Una Poot has agreed to meet with you. Follow me." Cheeve had dug Tinian's pieces of modified stormtrooper armor out of his KeyBed, Redd Metalflake's insides, and Yccakic's Bottom Viol. Carrying their stash, they followed the droid deeper into Silver Station.

Una Poot's "receiving room" looked like a galley - - tables stood head to head, wall to wall. The crone herself sat at the head of one table. Threads of gray hair dangled over her shoulders. She wore an old green tunic and a pair of black pants that rolled at the top. Maybe they'd been half of some larger person's shipboards.

"Cheeve," she exclaimed in a rusty-sounding voice. "I wish I had time to chatter, but I don't. What is it you think I can use?"

"This is Tinian I'att," Cheeve said casually. "She's got - - you tell her, Tinian."

Tinian related her story. At the appropriate moment, Yccakic displayed the vital pair of smuggled c-boards. "I only hope someone can use them against the Empire," Tinian finished.

"Custom armor isn't cheap," snapped Una Poot. "Most resistance troops can't afford any armor. What's your price?"

"You don't understand. I'm giving them to you. You'll have to analyze them, and--"

"Everybody has her price. If I don't pay you, you'll come for me later."

Tinian considered. "Well, there's a favor you could do me."

"Hah. There's always a price. I told you. What's the favor?"

"When I was a kid--"

"You're still a kid."

Tinian flushed. Pain and loss had aged her. Didn't it show? "I had a Wookiee bodyguard who died helping me escape the Imperials. I'd like to find someone who was related to him, so I could make sure Wrrl's memory was honored. That would mean a lot to him."

Una Poot half smiled. "That's an unusual favor, missie. I'll think about it, if I've got time. It'd be nice to be rich enough to have bodyguards."

"It was," Tinian admitted humbly. "I've only begun to realize how nice it was."

"Good," Una Poot cackled. "The more the Empire took from you, the harder you'll fight."

Tinian glared at the crone. "In that case, they're in for trouble. They slaughtered my family while I watched."

Una Poot's eyes darkened. "There's more behind that pain in your eyes than your family or a bodyguard, girl. What was he like?"

He? How had the old woman guessed? Tinian pictured Daye in her mind: dark-haired, a long gentle face, and that odd gray streak at the center of one eyebrow. "He was brilliant," Tinian remembered. "Hard working. And - - I never told anyone about this on Druckenwell, but he's dead now, so it can't hurt him, can it?"

"What can't hurt him? Come on, girl. I haven't got time to play whatsit."

"He was Force-sensitive. He read people perfectly. Including me. He had a generous spirit. He always tried to please."

Una Poot scowled. "Sounds like the Empire made an enemy in you, missie. I'll alert the ships docked here and see if anybody knows who might be related to this bodyguard of yours. What was his name? Wrr?"

"Wrrl. Short for Wrrlevgebev."

"Wrrlevgebev," repeated Una Poot. "But don't call me. I'll call you. Oh, and thanks for the c-boards. It's a long shot, but--"

"I understand," said Tinian.

* * *

Una Poot stared after Cheeve and his adopted refugee richgirl. The technology they'd brought? Extraneous equipage for wealthy, uniformed units. Now, if they could've resurrected Tinian's

Force-sensitive sweetheart, that might've solved a crisis for her. Una needed to find someone sensitive, like her first man - - Droque - - had been. Her blaster carbines must reach the right people on Monor. It was a tricky system to negotiate.

But Droque was 30 years dead, and evidently this one was gone, too.

And she'd never turned down a windfall. She tossed

Cheeve's contributions into a box, then reached for her comlink. One Wookiee berthed at Silver knew all the clans. She could pay for those pieces by making one call.

She thumbed the comlink.

* * *

To Tinian's surprise, Una Poot summoned her and her companions back to the galley that evening. Behind the crone stood a huge Wookiee of a color Tinian had never seen. His fur was dark brown, but each guard hair glistened silver at the tip. The effect made him shimmer. "This is Chenlambec," said Una Poot. "He might be able to help you pass that message."

Tinian barked A short greeting. Chenlambec woofed back. Una Poot raised both of her scraggly eyebrows. "Where did you learn to speak Wookiee?"

"From Wrrl," explained Tinian. "Does Chenlambec work for you?"

The Wookiee bent forward, laughing.

"Not at the moment." Una Poot smiled with both sides of her mouth this time. "He's a bounty hunter."

Tinian stared. She'd heard of beings who hunted others for money - - who killed for profit, not patriotism. She despised the idea. She'd never dreamed that she might stand in front of a hunter.

"You two can talk in my private alcove, if you'd like." Grinning, Una Poot gestured toward a hatch on one side of the galley.

Tinian narrowed her eyes, repelled by the woman's sense of humor.

Chenlambec spouted a rapid stream in Shyriiwook, asking how she had known Wrrlevgebev.

She didn't think that the bounty hunter would appreciate hearing publicly that Wrrl had been her family's slave. Evidently she'd have to address him privately, if she talked at all.

And this would have meant so much to Wrrl. She could do it for Wrrl. She led the big Wookiee into Una Poot's private alcove.

It was small and bare with a single ancient luma dangling from its ceiling. "I was 12 when I met Wrrl." Tinian shut the hatch and backed up against it. She positioned her hand near the control that would open it again.

Chenlambec bent to stand under the alcove's low ceiling. He kept to a corner opposite her.

"There were slavers in Il Avali, the city where I grew up. One of them was beating him - - it looked like they meant to kill him with a shock whip.

Later, I found out he'd tried to keep them from selling a young female Kitonak away from her child. Anyway, I got loose from my grandmother and jumped into the ring." She'd never realized the danger. "I threw myself over the poor bloody creature and yelled at the slavers that I'd buy him. Grandmother argued with me, but I won. That's how I met Wrrl." Wrrl had been utterly ethical, totally loyal. How could any Wookiee stoop to bounty hunting?

Chenlambec crossed his silvery arms. A broad black bandolier spanned his chest from right shoulder to left hip, studded with odd silver cubes. He barked a question.

"I didn't know then about your people and the life debt," she answered. "But I found out as soon as I learned to speak Shyriiwook. Please tell his clan that he discharged his debt fully, Chenlambec. He died helping me escape the Imperial stormtroopers who killed my grandparents."

He bowed his head and woofed softly.

"You're welcome," she said, confused but impressed by his private manner.

Then he raised his head and told a strange story. Evidently several of the bounties that the Empire had paid him were wasted. He had actually helped several "acquisitions" escape to the Rebel Alliance, then donated most of the funds that the Empire paid him... to Una Poot for buying arms, this time; last time, to a refugee group. He added that Una Poot was one of three people - - four, now - - who knew his secret. He asked her to honor it.

Tinian shut her slack jaw and wished Daye were here... not just because she missed him so desperately, but he would've known if the huge stranger were lying. Left to herself, she had to trust her hunch that Chenlambec was what he claimed - - someone whose mission actually excited her - - and that he wanted her respect in return. Cheeve and Yccakic had tried to comfort her by caring about her, but she needed to care about someone else.

She stretched out a hand.

He clasped it with a grip as gentle and strong as Wrrl's had been. Gravely he thanked her again. Then he motioned her away from the hatch.

"Wait," she exclaimed.

Chenlambec backed off a long step.

She wondered where - - in all the thousand-thousand worlds - - she'd gotten this crazy idea. But she was no musician. And she knew explosives. And Chenlambec made her want to live. "Would you let me apprentice to you?"

Chenlambec gave a startled woof.

"I'm serious," she said. "I grew up in an armament factory. My knowledge of explosives might be useful in your trade."

His blue eyes twinkled as he apologized and declined - - she was too small and delicate for bounty hunting. He had survived the deaths of two partners, one very recently. From now on, he would hunt alone.

"I have no fear of dying," Tinian insisted. "In your profession, if I died, it would be clean and fast."

Not necessarily. He crossed his arms and looked half away, a pose Wrrl had used only when adamantly refusing.

"I see," she said sadly. "Well. Thank you for carrying that news for me."

She pushed out of the alcove wondering what she would do with the rest of her life. She'd discovered how to care again, and that she wanted to care, and it was a relief... if temporary. Maybe Una Poot had a place for her.

The crone wasn't waiting with Cheever and Yccakic. "Everything all right?" asked Yccakic.

Tinian shrugged. "Yes. Good-bye, Chenlambec."

The Wookiee raised a hand in farewell and then left her alone with her traveling companions. Dispirited, she trailed Cheeve and Yccakic to the bunk room. While she'd spoken with the bounty hunter, they'd agreed to play a special cruise-concert for Una Poot and her inner circle, tomorrow afternoon on board her personal tugship... in lieu of rent on their cabin.

"Rent?" Tinian exclaimed. "On this hole?"

Cheeve shrugged. "It's a chance to perform. Feel like singing?"

Tinian cleared her throat. Cheeve's wife, Twilit Hearth, could scorch blast shielding with her voice. "I wouldn't do you justice. Do you know enough instrumental numbers?"

"We can carry the show if you'll fill in one or two songs--"

"Anybody tired?" asked Yccakic. "We'd better dim the lights and get some rest, if we're performing tomorrow."

Tinian lay down, but she couldn't sleep. Every time she shut her eyes, she saw Daye... or Wrrl, rushing the stormtroopers who finally killed him.. . or saboteurs, threatening to blow holes in Silver Station-

Abruptly she sat bolt upright. She'd been asleep on her feet! She should be out sniffing the corridors for explosives.

Cheeve's hold-out blaster dangled out of a pocket on his pants, which he'd hung haphazardly over one end of his bunk. She slipped it into her vest pocket and crept out into the corridor.

Two hours later, she caught a faint whiff of something that made the hair on her neck stand up: JL-12-F, a product of one of I'att Armament's competitors. Manufactured for controlled planetside demolition, it exploded in a symmetrical, almost linear pattern. It did not belong on board a space station.

Sabotage. Following the whiff trail, she stole up a corridor that led toward the docking area.

That couldn't be right. She reversed herself and hurried in the opposite direction. The scent grew stronger. She followed it down an access ladder.

On the fourth level down, she lost it. She doubled back again and climbed off the ladder into an area that was marginally tidier than others, maybe housing for Silver Station's upper class... such as it was. Down here, the

odor grew so strong that she wondered why other people hadn't noticed. She gripped the little blaster in one hand and slunk forward.

Two dark, furry shapes crouched next to the flat outer bulkhead of Silver Station's original construct. "Hey!" Tinian cried. She leveled the blaster.

The aliens whirled toward her. Each had a long, pointed snout and small round ears. "Hey!" they echoed her in chorus.

Then they charged.

Tinian fired. One Ranat curled up, shrieking. The other kept coming. Long sharp teeth closed on her left leg. Tinian screamed and struggled to draw a bead on the vicious creature without shooting herself in the foot. The Ranat shook her leg so hard that stars danced in front of her. She flailed for balance.

A clear shot! Tinian took it. Powerful jaws released her calf, and the creature screamed at her. She backed off and fired again.

The Ranat charged at her other leg.

She squeezed off another blast. The Ranat collapsed at her feet.

She kicked it away, splattering it with blood from her leg.

The other Ranat hadn't moved. But what about that explosive? She limped forward. Her injured leg trembled when she tried to bend down.

Be calm, she admonished herself. She crouched, even though it hurt. The JL-12-F was packed into a standard cylinder, heat-fused against the outer bulkhead. Fused to its other end were a primer and c-board. Somehow the Ranats had obtained a solid-state detonator, almost fail-safe.

The c-board had two vulnerable spots, though, where the main circuit entered and exited the timing mechanism. Tinian scrambled back to the first Ranat and frisked it. She found a belt knife, limped to the bomb again, and delicately cut the connections. That disabled the detonator.

She exhaled. Then she frowned. The c-board might be dead, but she couldn't leave an explosive canister this close to an outer bulkhead. If a spark

set it off here, everyone on board would be at risk, from Cheeve to Chenlambec. She tried to pry the knife into a hairline crack between explosive cylinder and detonator. Its blade didn't bend, which worried her. The steel must be brittle-

It snapped without warning. She dropped it in time to save herself another deep, nasty cut.

This was nothing she could disarm without proper tools... but JL12-F did require a spark, not an impact, to detonate it. She backed up to the cylinder, balanced on her hurt leg, and kicked sharply with her heel. Fresh jabs of pain shot through her leg. The cylinder broke loose from the bulkhead and clattered onto the deck.

Gingerly she scooped it up and carried it deeper into the station. She glanced back to see if any Ranats followed. A red splatter trail marked her route. When she started walking again, she almost slipped in a red puddle. That'd collected quickly!

She set down the explosive canister at mid-corridor and hammered on the nearest door. "Hello?" she shouted. "This is an emergency!"

* * *

The Stationer took her to a medic on Level Three and called Cheeve. When Tinian emerged an hour later, leaning on Cheeve, a huge, shimmering Wookiee waited in the corridor outside. He howled somberly at her.

"I'm all right," she assured Chenlambec (I have one more friend in the universe!). "They don't have a medical droid, but there's a competent human in there. He fused the artery. I'm just supposed to take it easy for a few days."

He cocked his head and barked a peculiar question - did she realize that he and dozens of others owed her a life debt?

Tinian laughed. "No, no. I saved my own life, too. So it doesn't count."

He woofed an offer. Tinian stared.

"What did he say?" asked Cheeve.

Tinian felt slightly rummy from chemical painkillers. "I, um, yesterday I offered to go into business with Chenlambec. He just invited me on board his ship to see what I knew about his trade."

"But isn't he a... "

Chenlambec clasped his fur-draped hands, looking calm.

"It's your life." Cheeve touched her shoulder. "But I wish you'd stay with us. Who'll sing that gig tonight?"

"You've been kind, Cheeve. Much kinder than you needed to be, and I appreciate everything you've done. But I'm no musician. I need to find my own place. You want that, don't you?"

"Of course."

Yccakic turned so that Chenlambec couldn't see his face. "Tinian, be careful. He might--"

"I'll be fine." If Tinian understood one thing about Wookiees, she understood the life debt. Rightly or wrongly, Chenlambec considered himself bound.

Limping on her numb leg, she followed him back out to the docking area, then through an umbilical onto a small saucer-shaped craft with three mammoth engines. Like Silver Station, it had seen better days. Better decades, she decided as she rubbed a rust spot.

Still, this looked like her chance to hurt the Empire.

Chenlambec sat her down in front of his shipboard computer. He called up a succession of weaponry images. Tinian recited specs for an hour. Then he tossed her a blaster rifle. She disassembled and reassembled it in four minutes.

Then she yawned. Instantly, Chenlambec apologized. She mustn't walk clear back to the bunk room, he insisted. She could nap on board his little ship Wroshyr, named for the home trees of Kashyyyk. In the afternoon, after she'd

caught a long healing nap, they could discuss terms - - if she still wanted to apprentice to him.

She collapsed on a bunk that felt softer than clouds and fell asleep before she could thank him.

* * *

Daye Azur-Jamin shut his eyes and let his companions carry him through the little blockade runner's airlock. Delayed at Doldur Spaceport, they'd used up their last medpac two days ago, and the pain was back in full force. He couldn't feel one leg at all, but that was a blessing. The other leg made up for it. One hand, too was crushed, and his companions had bandaged his shoulder and head with synthflesh, but

beneath

that superficially healed layer, they all throbbed.

Woyiq, a big beefy human, carried the end of Daye's pallet nearest his feet. He let go with one hand and waved at a station droid. "Hey, you! You - - how about a float bed? I've got an injured human here!" It was indicative of Woyiq's strength that the pallet didn't wobble when he dropped one side.

The droid scurried closer. It was an aging protocol unit, probably in charge of docking.

"I am Toalar Yalom Yalom," said the Gotal who carried the pallet's head end. Two cone-shaped perceptor horns protruded from the top of his head. "Una Poot knows me. She will want this human to be taken to a medic immediately."

"It is very early morning here at Silver Station," said the droid, "and we have just gone off saboteur alert. She may still be sleeping."

"This human might still recover if she got him into bacta today." Toalar's knobby gray-brown brows lowered over red eyes. "Take us to your medical station."

"I am sorry. All arrivals must be interviewed before--"

"Fine. Take us for our interview now." Gotals spoke in monotones, but Toalar looked fierce. The horns helped.

Evidently the droid was also programmed to recognize fierceness. Either that, or he automatically allowed for emergencies. He led them deep into the gray-walled station.

"Saboteur alert?" Daye murmured as they carried him.

"Whatever it was, it's over," Toalar answered.

In a galley full of tables, Woyiq and Toalar set down Daye's pallet. Toalar walked up to an old woman who had incredibly cold eyes. Toalar had told Daye that Una Poot's incompetent crone act was her version of deep cover, though she was slightly crazy. Toalar claimed she had connections and resources that would surprise him. Evidently Toalar's resistance cell back on Druckenwell depended on Una Poot for tactical support.

"Toalar," she creaked. "Bless your horns. You haven't reported in too long. Has the resistance died on Druckenwell?"

Toalar's face twitched. It was flat where a human would've had a nose.

"Far from it. All Druckenwell's stirred up at the moment. I need--"

She walked to Daye's pallet. "Who's this?"

Daye tried to sit up, but his hand and shoulder wouldn't bear weight. "Help, Woyiq," he called. The big Human stepped into position behind Daye's head and slid his hands down Daye's shoulders to lever him upright. "My name is Daye Azur-Jamin. I am an armament specialist. I want to join the Rebellion."

"Good. But why should we take you?"

"I worked directly with Strephan I'att, of--"

"I'att Armament on Druckenwell?" cackled the crone. "Then you served the Empire."

"Yes," Daye admitted. He sensed her sincerity, despite her unpleasant manners. She would trust him only if he were absolutely honest. "Strephan I'att and I developed an armor field that would have made stormtroopers invulnerable."

Instantly, he sensed that his news startled her. Did she know him? Should he know her? She turned her back and walked several steps away to rummage in a box on one table. She drew out a small square object. When she carried it back to Daye, she had regained her skeptical-crone expression. "Recognize this?"

Daye squinted his good eye. It was a c-board, and - - by the Force, he recognized it! "That is a preliminary processing unit," he said. "The heat deflection function of the armor dissipated energy momentarily, until the anti-energy field--"

"Fine," said Una Poot. "You're real."

"Tinian," he breathed. "Has she been here? Who brought her? Is she still here?"

Una Poot's laugh sounded like a snort. "She's not on board, since that's what you really want to know." His inner sense told him that her statement was literally true... but misleading. "Where is she?"

Una Poot hitched one foot up on a galley bench. "Listen, son. I have buried three husbands in space. Young love doesn't last. So long as the Empire spreads, there is more important work to do than to sit staring into each others' eyes. Can you live with that ethic? Because if you can't, I don't want you."

"I can," said Daye. "I let Tinian think that I'd died when the factory was destroyed. When I blew it up - - from inside."

The old woman's frown wrinkles smoothed out. "Oh," she said softly.

"I mean to dedicate what's left of my life to bringing down the Empire."

She grinned. "Good answer, boy. In that case, welcome to the Rebel Alliance. I'll call down to the medic and tell him you're on your way. But as soon as you're out of the soup, I'll have work for you."

"Of course. That's what I came here for. I had no idea you would have pieces to work with. That will simplify everything."

He sensed faint surprise; she hadn't meant to assign him R&D work. But she picked up his cue as if that'd been her plan. "We can't afford to build it here. That's the only problem. Toalar?" Una Poot turned to Daye's Gotal companion. "Do you remember where the medical center is? Deck Three?"

"I think so."

"Then get Daye Azur-Jamin down there on the double."

* * *

Tinian woke up with an alarm klaxon ringing in her ears. Her leg throbbed the same rhythm. "What is it?" she cried. Then she remembered she'd bunked down on a stranger's ship. Had she been betrayed?

Not by a Wookiee. If he thought she'd saved his life, the last thing he would ever do was betray her.

She stumbled in the only direction possible and found Chenlambec sitting in front of the Wroshyr's command console. "What is it?" she asked again.

He bared his teeth and pointed at the viewscreen.

A huge wedge-shaped ship had appeared near Silver Station. "Star Destroyer," she whispered. Adrenaline washed through her. A swarm of smaller ships, TIE fighters and others, swooped across the narrow distance between the Star Destroyer and the helpless station. Some had already reached it.

A light blinked on Chenlambec's console. He swatted a control. A cracked voice came over a cabin loudspeaker. "... now docked, this is Una Poot. We are under attack and outnumbered. Evacuate if you can. All ships now... "

Chenlambec roared a challenge. Then he pointed at the other viewscreen. A squadron of Imperial fighters ran alongside Silver Station, pouring energy beams into the joint where two of its external corridors met. One long cylinder broke away from its neighbor. Gases spewing out of its cut end jet-powered the cylinder out to an even more desperate angle.

Tinian gulped. "My partners are in there somewhere! We've got to help them!"

Chenlambec roared a negative: he couldn't afford moments, and she couldn't help her companions by dying with them. He slammed a shaggy fist onto a control, then flicked a row of linked switches. "Are you powering up?" Tinian clutched an overhead conduit. "Are we going to fight or run for it?"

He didn't answer. The moment his ready lights glowed, he grasped a throttle momentarily - - then flicked off the linked row. The Wroshyr lurched. Tinian assumed they'd just disengaged from the station. The Imperials, he explained, would fire on anything that was escaping under power, and his shields weren't strong enough to absorb energy at this close range.

"Why not?" she exclaimed. "You've got to have shields!"

He barked: full shielding would cost more than the ship was worth. More than he brought home from a good bounty job.

Tinian gaped. People died because they couldn't afford protection? She'd always taken armor for granted. Now she realized that poverty and peril sometimes traveled together.

Slowly, Silver Station seemed to drift away from the Wroshyr. Tinian caught herself holding her breath. This was just like before, waiting to be spotted and shot. Cheeve, Redd, and Yccakic-

Wait. She'd slept through the afternoon. By now, they should be on board Una Poot's private tugship. What luck! Cheeve did have a knack for leaving town before trouble arrived.

Chenlambec suggested that if she didn't want to watch, she hustle aft and strap down.

Tinian sank into his copilot's chair. "I'd rather help, if I can."

Chenlambec swept a hand across the row of engine controls: mains, laterals, retros. He would man the ship's laser cannon if she'd stand ready to fire up all engines simultaneously. He would program a burn into the nav computer.

Tinian had always learned best under pressure. "I'll do what I can," she promised.

* * *

Daye had tried to relax when Silver Station's human medic lowered him into the tank and filled it with clear liquid. He tried to breathe normally through the mask. The synthetic fluid didn't sting his eyes.

Then the medic released a flood of brilliant red bacta into the tank. Billions of tiny creatures seemed to crawl over him. A weird smell slithered into his breath mask. His skin twitched where he'd been wounded and started to heal, either naturally or covered with synthflesh. The medic had warned him that his body might resist treatment. He must relax and try to let the bacta work. It would seek out traumatized flesh. Healed tissue barred its way.

To keep from fighting it, he thought hard. He'd thrown everything away when he'd blown up I'att Armament. What was he becoming? A hopeless idealist, a freedom fighter?

He might survive now. The bacta might heal him.

(Microscopic creatures stung flesh, nibbling his scars--)

If the bacta healed him, he would run to Tinian -

No. He would still put Tinian behind him, both for her sake and so he could serve the Alliance freely. Besides, thinking about Tinian gouged fresh wounds into another part of him that was trying to heal.

He wondered if the bacta were dancing on his eardrums or if he heard an alarm. The medic had stepped out several lifetimes ago, actually only minutes, but-

Through red fluid and glass he spotted a huge dark form followed by one with Gotal horns. Woyiq and Toalar? The shapes came on quickly. The big one shrank again, moving away.

Then it returned, raising something overhead. Something with lots of right angles. A chair?

Daye's tank split wide open. Fluid splashed the clinic floor.

Toalar seized Daye and started unhooking his breath mask and harness. He talked quickly while he worked, putting an amazing amount of expression into monotone speech. "Silver Station's under attack. I don't know if the Ranats squealed or if our ship was followed, but the Empire is here. There are scan pulses bouncing through everything. Una Poot's got no defense force. The station's coming to pieces." Toalar had always claimed that his cone-shaped receptors picked up energy emissions.

"Here, Daye." Woyiq flung him a brown cloth bundle. "It's all I could find. I'm sorry. I hope it'll do--"

Before Woyiq apologized a second time, Toalar had slipped Daye into the cast-off Givin robe. Its sleeves dangled over his hands and its selvage dragged past his feet, but it covered him.

"Can you stand?" Toalar asked. "Did the bacta take?"

"I'll try." Daye gritted his teeth and tried moving his legs. One tracked. The other didn't. "You'd better carry me."

"Right," said Woyiq. "Up you get." He turned around.

Daye wrapped his arms around the big man's neck. Woyiq straightened. Daye tried to grip Woyiq's middle with his legs, but only his right leg functioned. At least his shoulder didn't hurt as badly as before. "Go," he grunted.

He hung on until both arms and both shoulders ached, and then he hung on longer. Toalar dashed ahead of Woyiq. Brandishing a blaster, he peered around a corner and waved an all-clear.

Just as Woyiq followed around that corner, the corridor erupted in blaster fire. Laser blasts splattered the walls. Woyiq spun, and Daye flew off. He hit a wall feet-first. Newly regenerated nerves screamed bloody murder.

White armor appeared at the far end of the passage. "Go!" Daye cried. "I'll just slow you down!"

"Good try," muttered Woyiq as he bent over Daye. "We almost lost you once." He seized Daye by both arms and heaved him over one shoulder.

Daye raised his head to look behind. A stormtrooper dropped into a firing crouch. Woyiq's shoulder drove into Daye's stomach. He curled around that shoulder, trying to cushion the gut-pounding bounce - - and present a smaller target.

"Stop!" Toalar shouted. Daye raised his head again, tried to orient himself, and felt himself fall. He caught hold of something. Yellow foam sprayed his hands.

"Here they come!" Toalar shouted again.

Woyiq lowered his shoulder and ran at a tightly closed hatch.

Daye squinted to see what he'd activated. It looked like a flame douser, mounted by one clip to the bulkhead. He lunged at the clip and detached it, then scooted backward to lean against the bulkhead. He aimed the thick yellow spray past Woyiq and Toalar up the passage.

A white shape dashed into his line of fire. It arrived upright, went diagonal, and skidded out of sight horizontally. Woyiq presented his other shoulder and rammed the hatch again. It rang like a huge bell. Light appeared along one edge. "You're through!" Daye cried, holding the spray steady. Another stormtrooper slid into the slime, through it, and past... but now they had troopers on both sides.

Woyiq picked up Daye and pushed him at the narrow opening. Daye reached through, slapping the wall high and low. Something gave. The hatch sprang open. Daye fell through a 90-degree gravity shift and hit the deck again. This time he rolled, absorbing the impact. He was going numb all over.

Woyiq picked him up like a doll and carried him in both arms. Toalar covered their retreat, firing behind them.

Woyiq took a right turn.

"No!" Toalar shouted. "Straight! We're almost at the main dock!" Woyiq sped up a final passage, around one more corner, and up a boarding ramp. He skidded to a halt at the sight of a blast rifle's muzzle.

"Friendly!" called Toalar. "Una, let us through!"

* * *

Thank the Force! "Hurry it up!" Una shouted. "Did you get him?" The tugship shuddered. Woyiq pounded down into its main passage. "They fired the explosive bolts," exclaimed Toalar. "We're underway."

"Is that Daye?" Una hated repeating questions. Especially urgent ones. "We need that boy."

Woyiq turned around and showed Daye and Una Poot to each other. Pink streaks on Daye's face evidenced an incomplete bacta treatment.

"Good," she said. "Bring him to the bridge."

Daye asked, "Are the armor pieces aboard?"

"Yes, though I don't know why." Una Poot seized Woyiq's arm and pulled the huge human along. She felt like a Chadra-Fan hauling a Whiphid. "Our people can't afford body armor." Still, she knew people who might be able to develop it. The uniformed Alliance sprang to mind. This time, she didn't dismiss the thought. With Silver Station about to blow, she'd have to lie low for a while... as soon as her tugship delivered one shipment to the Monor system. "What took you so long?" she puffed.

"Sorry," said Woyiq. "Really, I'm sorry--"

"We stopped to play tag with stormtroopers." Toalar holstered his blaster and rubbed his perceptor horns. "Long day."

"Get up here," Una ordered. "Get Daye where he can see the main screen." This attack would cost him dearly. They would never get him into bacta in time for complete regeneration now. He would need prosthetics, and from the twitch in his face, he knew it. She must give him hope. These sensitives could be delicate.

The tugship shuddered. "We're hit!" cried a crewman.

"They worry," grumbled Una. "These shields'll stand four or five direct hits. The Sitting Duck was a fine ship even with two dozen culslon gas tanks in tow. We'll make it. Over there, son. Look." She pointed out a vector.

Silver Station shrank in the near distance. Farther away, a small, saucer-shaped ship swooped back toward a TIE fighter, firing energy bursts. The Imperial exploded. The saucer streaked out of the nebula and vanished.

Still cradled by Woyiq, Daye tugged the Givin robe closed over his chest. "Somebody hit back, anyway," he said.

"That was your lady," Una crowed. "She got away safe, too." Tinian had also used precious comm time begging Una to rescue Cheeve, Redd, and Yccakic. Una had transmitted back: they were as safe as she was.

"Thank you," Daye exclaimed. "But how do you know it's Tinian?"

"She joined up with a friend of mine, a big strong Wookiee. Chenlambec needed a partner with her kind of abilities." Partnering that pair had been a rare stroke of serendipity. Another long fuse now sputtered under the Emperor's throne.

"Wookiee activists aren't known for leading quiet lives," Daye objected softly.

Drogue had been protective, too. He'd hurt when Una hurt. "You want to fight the Empire. So does she. But she needs someone to teach her. Are you going to deny her that?"

Before he could answer, Toalar pointed at the aft screen. "Look!" Two squadrons of TIE fighters chased the tugship at full speed. They obviously wouldn't reach firing range before the Duck jumped into hyperspace.

"This is some ship." Daye tugged the Givin robe closed again.

Una grinned. "That's why we held her for final evacuation. She's my own, and I've kept the crew current."

"But Silver Station's in Imperial hands." Daye shook his head. "We're defeated, aren't we, Una Poot?"

Una thought of the Rebel rabble waiting at Monor and the cargo stashed in her holds. She planted both hands on her hips. "Never. The Empire can't beat us, so long as one of us lives. Every time we escape, we live to fight another day. If enough worlds rise, we'll drive the Empire out of the galaxy."

Daye's dark eyes gleamed. "I hope we survive to see that."

Mission accomplished: his gloom had lifted. She patted his uninjured shoulder. "As soon as we jump to lightspeed and my medic looks you over, how about a little music to help you rest? You'll enjoy my nephew Cheeve's band--"

"Cheeve?" Daye's odd eyebrows shot up. "Sprig Cheever, of Druckenwell? "

**35:5:27/GLR/J25L/LAM.4.GRY/ENT/
T.Marelle**

Lamuir IV Prepares for Priole Danna Festival

Gryle City, Lamuir IV

The entire planet of Lamuir IV is powering up to celebrate the 2,367th annual Priole Danna Festival, which in just seven standard weeks will bring celebrants and professional party-goers from all over the galaxy to this normally staid and sensible planet for a week of revelry, parades, and the famous reenactments of traditional Lamuir dramas and folk plays.

But the Festival's big attraction for offworlders and onworlders alike is the Anapolla Musical Splash, the five day concert featuring musicians from all over the galaxy performing pieces representative of a myriad of Human and alien traditions. For those tracking the musical tempo of the galaxy, the sounds at the Anapolla reveal the powerful undercurrents of the musical river flowing through the Empire. Many of the groups and traditions heard at the Anapolla later surface as powerful and popular industry leaders, and indeed, many of the spectators of the Splash are representatives of recording studios eager to catch a trend on the way up.

By Tanda Marelle *Galactic Resorts*

Alone Against the Empire

1. You are CSL (SEE eh sel) Danenberger, a citizen of the planet Kyrouc. Kyrouc has been a backwater world for centuries, its population largely made up of farmers, with only one city large enough to have the facilities of a spaceport (the capital city of Montalvia). Recently, however, it has gained importance in the eyes of the Rebel Alliance as an ideal spot to obtain food supplies. A few days ago, the Alliance sent a diplomatic party to talk with Kyrouc's governing council; the talks are still underway. Some members of Kyrouc's council feel the world should join the Rebel Alliance; others fear the retribution of the Empire.

Kyrouc is officially an Empire world, of course, but Imperial military forces have never come here, not even during the height of the Clone Wars. You have read a lot about Imperial history, however—some say too much, for the drama of the Jedi Knights has settled deep into your bones. When the Rebels came to Kyrouc, you naturally tried to get close to them, since you have heard rumors that the last of the Jedi Knights is a member of the Rebellion. You have looked for ways to aid them, hoping to convince them to take you along when they leave, but you have found nothing so far. You wonder if even the Rebels think you are crazy, as so many of your fellow Kyrouaquians do.

"Oh well," you think to yourself, smiling. "No doubt something is bound to turn up sooner or later. Just trust to the Force."

On this particular day, you have been walking through the streets of Montalvia, whistling cheerfully to yourself, with your duelling sword bouncing against your leg with every step you take. You have walked to the east edge of the city, and are returning to the west, where the Rebel diplomats have their lodgings.

Your eyes are constantly scanning the area around you, looking for signs of anything unusual. Make a Perception roll: If you roll a 5 or better, go to paragraph 29; if you roll less than 5, go to paragraph 53.

2. Moving quickly, the Rebel Commander strikes the High Councilman on the back of the neck with the hard edge of his hand. Your fellow Kyrouaquian crumples nervelessly to the floor. The other Rebels gather up a few things, then head for the door. Their Commander waves you ahead when you tell him that you can lead him by a safer way than the main streets.

Taking the Rebels to the spaceport by means of a maze of back alleys, you finally stop next to a hangar at the edge of the landing area. Most of the stormtroopers have left the field and are probably nearly to the Rebel lodgings by now. Go to paragraph 54.

3. You run away before the guard can fire again. Go to paragraph 42.

4. Turn to paragraph 14.

5. Suddenly, someone clobbers you from behind. Your vision goes hazy around the edges, and there is a warm rush through your head. As you fall to the pavement, you see the face of the Kyrouaquian official you met at the Rebel lodgings smiling grimly over you. Turn to paragraph 45.

6. Your knees go weak, and you fall to the ground, helpless. You can hear the guard calling on a communicator for the city police to come and haul you away. Within about 10 seconds, however, you regain control of your numb limbs and climb to your feet. Go to paragraph 3.

7. Make a Climbing/Jumping roll four times. The difficulty number is 15. If all are successful, go to paragraph 32; otherwise go to 14.

8. You are stunned by the shot and knocked down. Within a few seconds, however, you struggle to your feet and begin running once again. Go to paragraph 17.

9. Laughing at the guard's melodramatic manner, you proceed toward the gate in the fence, where you hope to get some answers. Behind you, you hear him mutter something impolite and the sound of plastic sliding across leather. You spin to see him drawing a bead on you with his stun pistol. Make a dodge roll as the guard fires (his difficulty number and roll have already been calculated). If you roll a 9 or less, go to paragraph 47; otherwise go to 49.

10. You are incapacitated by the attack. You immediately lose consciousness and after medical treatment, you wake up to find yourself in the local jail; go to paragraph 26.

11. Guessing that someone on Kyrouc's council has called the Imperials here to capture the Rebels, you decide that you had better get back to the Rebel lodgings as fast as you can. (You try not to think that there is also probably an Imperial Star Destroyer in orbit. That can wait until later.)

Make another Sneak roll. If you spotted the stormtroopers before they began to exit the cargo transports, your difficulty number is 10; if you didn't see them until they started to exit, your difficulty number is 15. If you succeed, go to paragraph 19; if not, go to 13.

12. You are wounded by the shot and knocked down. Within a few seconds, however, you struggle to your feet and begin running once again. Because of the wound, however, you will be minus 1D on all skill rolls for the rest of the adventure, and if you are wounded again, you will become incapacitated (in which case, go to paragraph 10, instead of the one listed at the end of this paragraph). Go to paragraph 17.

13. As you start to leap away, you hear a metallic voice shout, "Halt." One of the stormtroopers in the nearest ship has spotted you and is raising his blaster rifle. Do you stop (go to paragraph 30), or do you run (go to paragraph 25)?

14. You land on a table wrong, and it breaks to splinters under you. Suddenly, two large hairy fists lift you to your feet. Then one rears back to strike you.

You are locked in brawling combat with an ugly bruiser who has a Brawling skill of 4D, a Brawling Parry of 2D, and a Strength of 3D+2. He will only make one attack per combat round, but will try to parry if you successfully attack him. Because of the crowded nature of the cantina, you cannot draw your dueling sword, so you'll have to make do with your fists.

If you defeat the bruiser, go to paragraph 37; otherwise, go to 10 if you are incapacitated or 23 if you are mortally wounded.

15. Make a Hide/Sneak roll. The difficulty number is 10. If you succeed, go to paragraph 28; if you fail, go to 31.

16. You've been hit by a shot from the blaster rifle. Roll for Strength (blaster damage has been rolled). If you get 17 or more, go to paragraph 8; if less than 17 but at least 9, go to 10; if less than 9 but at least 6, go to 10; if less than 6, go to 23.

17. The stormtrooper fires again. Again you can dodge (at 1D less as you are running); his roll to hit has been made already. If you roll less than a 5, go to paragraph 16; otherwise, go to 38.

18. You sense someone following you, but you easily lose him by dodging through a couple of twisted alleyways. Do you now go back to the spaceport to spy some more (go to paragraph 50), or do you wander the city again (go to 39)?

19. Working your way cautiously away from the field, you slip silently back through the grass to the edge of town. Go to paragraph 38.

20. Other than the increased activity at the spaceport, nothing much seems to be happening in Montalvia today. Growing thirsty, you decide to stop in a nearby cantina for a cool drink.

The light is very dim inside, and you stand just inside the doorway for the moment it takes for your eyes to adjust. When they do, you notice that everyone in the place seems to be staring at you. Oh well, that's not too unusual.

You find a table in a corner and lean back against the whitewashed inner wall. Eventually, a service droid approaches. You order an exotic blend of iced tea made from the scrapings of a shelled creature from the Spiral Sea, then scan the room as you sip it gingerly. The hours pass by. You begin to doze in your chair. Go to paragraph 24.

21. Your side cramps painfully from where the stunner hit you, but you manage to remain on your feet. Go to paragraph 3.

22. No one seems to notice the brush bat's noise. Go to paragraph 28.

23. You are mortally wounded by the attack. It will take 1D+2 rounds for medical help to get to you. Roll 2D once for each round. If at any time you roll a number less than the number of rounds that have elapsed, go to paragraph 27; otherwise, go to paragraph 36.

24. You are awakened by the sound of a table breaking. Somehow a brawl has broken out. The floor is full of supposedly intelligent creatures slugging away at one another.

You decide to try to escape this ruckus, but you'll never make it past all of the combatants by conventional means. You need an inspired plan.

If you jump from tabletop to tabletop, you should be able to make it to the door and out into the street before the police show up. Climbing to your own tabletop, you proceed to put your plan into action. A grin of excitement spreads across your face as you prepare for the first leap. Go to paragraph 7.

25. Running as fast as your legs will carry you, you can also dodge the stormtrooper's fire, but at 1D less than usual. The stormtrooper's roll has been made; you should roll for your dodge. If you roll less than a 6, go to paragraph 16; otherwise, go to paragraph 38.

26. They hold you overnight and release you in the morning, keeping your sword.

When you check, you discover that the Rebel diplomats are gone, and no one wants to talk to you about where they went.

This is the end of the adventure for CSL. Perhaps you'd like to try again with another character.

27. You die before help can reach you. This is the end of the adventure for CSL. Perhaps you'd like to try again with another character.

28. You find a gully where you can move right up to the fence without being seen (you hope). The nearest cargo transport is about 20 meters away. As you watch, the hatch opens, but it is very dark inside. Normal senses are not up to this task; you must make a Sense roll. The difficulty number is 15. If you succeed, turn to paragraph 40; if you fail, turn to 51.

29. Toward the southwest, the direction of the spaceport, there seems to be a lot of activity. An unusually great number of grain transports are landing. Someone off-planet must have made a great purchase of grain and has sent the transport ships to get it all. Do you head toward the spaceport (paragraph 33), or do you continue to patrol to the west, the direction you are currently headed (paragraph 20)?

30. The stormtrooper keeps you covered until the local police arrive to cart you off to jail. Go to paragraph 26.

31. Working your way through the dry grass at the field's edge, you startle up a brush bat. It flies up, screeching horribly, and wings over the fenced-in area. Go to paragraph 22.

32. You make it over four tables. Fists and drinking utensils are flying all around you. You must make three more Climbing/Jumping rolls, but since you have to dodge the flying objects, your skill code will be less 1D. The difficulty number is still 15. If all three rolls are successful, go to paragraph 43; otherwise, go to 4.

33. It takes you about 20 minutes to reach the spaceport. You don't notice anything unusual along the way, but once you get there, it strikes you as strange that the cargo transports you saw have all landed within a fenced-in area. Usually, they just land out on the open field. You decide to try to get closer. Do you walk openly up to the fence (paragraph 35), or do you sneak around to the back of the fenced-in area, near the west edge of the field (paragraph 15)?

34. Before long, Imperial stormtroopers begin to exit this and the other cargo transports. Turn to paragraph 11.

35. When you get within arm's reach of the fence, a guard armed with a stunner pistol, waves you away shouting, "Get on out here, this is private property." Do you do as he says (go to 42), or do you walk toward the gate (paragraph 9)?

36. The medics get to you in time. After medical treatment, you wake up in the local jail; go to paragraph 26.

37. Leaving the big bruise lying on the floor, you try for the door once again. You slip past two creatures who are strangling each other against the bar, duck beneath a flying chair, and jump over a squat being who attempts to kick your feet out from under you. Go to paragraph 43.

38. You run all the way to the Rebel lodgings, figuring that the stormtroopers aren't far behind you.

The Rebels are quartered in an old apartment building surrounded by abandoned warehouses. You've been here many times in the past, usually just standing in the lobby daydreaming about becoming a member of the order of the famous Jedi Knights. This time, however, you dash up the front stairs, through the front door, and up the interior stairs to the second floor. You pound furiously on the door to the Rebel apartments.

A 3PO protocol droid opens the door, and before he can give a greeting, you push past him into the main sitting room. The Rebel Commander is standing next to the front window, talking to a member of the Kyroutaquian High Council. The five other Rebel members stand in a group in the center of the room. As you burst in, they spread out to position themselves between you and the Commander.

Breathlessly, you stammer out your information. The Rebel Commander's expression turns hard and grim; the other Rebels look shocked. The Kyroutaquian High Councilman looks as if he could happily cut your throat.

Turn to paragraph 2.

39. Wandering the city streets, whistling absently, you try to decide what to do next. Nothing untoward is happening in the city proper, or you would surely spot it. After an hour or so, you decide to return to the Rebel lodgings. When you get there, you notice that they seem oddly deserted. Entering the building, you discover that the Rebels are gone.

You head back out to the street. Go to paragraph 5.

40. By means of the Force, your eyesight is increased beyond normal human ability long enough for you to see Imperial stormtroopers inside the cargo transport, preparing to exit. Go to paragraph 11.

41. Your fellow Kyroutaquian objects to leaving, but the Rebel Commander begs his indulgence. The Kyroutaquian official steps into the room with the other Rebels, and you get to talk to the Commander alone. Make a Command Roll to convince him that your information is important. Since you really haven't seen very much, the difficulty number is 15. If you succeed, go to paragraph 52; if you fail, go to paragraph 48.

42. You move back toward a more crowded area of the field and stand in the shadow of a hangar. You can now either sneak around to the back of the fenced-in area (go to 15), or you can leave the spaceport to return to the Rebel lodgings (paragraph 44).

43. Leaping agilely through the front doors, you land on your feet in the street outside. You decide that it is probably high time to head back to the Rebel lodgings.

When you get there, you notice that they seem oddly deserted. Entering the building, you discover that the Rebels are gone. Although over the course of the next several days, you ask around to find out where they went, no one wants to talk to you about them.

This is the end of the adventure for CSL. Perhaps you would like to try again with another character.

44. You make your way up the western edge of the city, along alleys and back streets, to the Rebel lodgings, an old apartment building surrounded by empty warehouses. As you head up the stairs to the second floor, you daydream that you are a Jedi Knight, going to report to the old Republic's Senate. You imagine that they listen to your revelation of covert activities at the spaceport with rapt expressions of growing horror, and with a suitable amount of admiration for your courage in searching it out.

In actuality, when you knock at their door, a 3PO unit opens it. "Yes sir, how can I serve you?" it says in its electronic voice.

"I'd like to speak to the Rebel spokesman, please," you respond, "I have news of great import." The last words slip out before you quite realize what you are saying, and you try lamely to finish with a dramatic flair of ominous portent. The effect is somewhat ruined by the embarrassed grin that follows.

The droid leads you into the main room of the apartment. A tired-looking man in a Rebel uniform sits next to a coffee table, a Kyroutaquian official stands silently in front of the room's large front window. In an adjacent room, you can hear the muffled conversation of the other five Rebel visitors.

"Pardon me, Commander," the droid addresses the man in the chair, "A messenger is here with news of great import."

The Kyroutaquian looks at you with interest as the man in the chair lifts his head to learn what you have to say. Do you tell what you know about the activity at the spaceport (go to paragraph 46), or do you ask to speak to the Commander alone (paragraph 41)?

45. The world goes black. When you wake up, you are in a cell in the Montalvia city jail. Go to paragraph 26.

46. As you tell what you have seen (which honestly isn't much), the Kyrouaquian steps forward and whispers something to the Rebel Commander. A sarcastic smile rests on his lips as he speaks. The Commander nods, then returns his attention to you. Make a Command roll to convince the Commander that your information is important. Your fellow Kyrouaquian is undercutting your creditability, so the difficulty number is 30. If you succeed, go to paragraph 52; otherwise, go to 48.

47. The guard's shot hits you. Make a strength roll (the guard's damage roll has already been figured). If you roll a 7 or less, go to paragraph 45; if you roll greater than 7, but no more than 14, go to 6; if you roll more than 14, go to 21.

48. The Rebel Commander tells you he will check into it and thanks you for your concern. You are sure he doesn't really believe there is any danger, and you leave the building feeling ashamed and disappointed at having failed in your goal.

You walk across the street from the Rebel lodgings. Make a Perception roll; the difficulty number is 11. If you succeed, go to paragraph 18; if you fail, go to paragraph 5.

49. The guard's shot missed! Lucky you. Go to paragraph 3.

50. You head back to the spaceport by the same way you came, hoping to learn something more about the strange activity there. Reaching a hangar building at the edge of the landing field, you decide to sneak around the back side of the fenced-in area. Go to paragraph 15.

51. Your eyes cannot penetrate the darkness of the cargo transport's interior, so you stay where you are for a few minutes, waiting to see what will happen. Turn to paragraph 34.

52. The Rebel Commander decides to bring his fellow Rebels and accompany you to the spaceport to see for himself what is going on. As they prepare, your fellow Kyrouaquian tries to convince them that the activity at the spaceport is nothing unusual, but now that the Commander has begun to act, he will not change his mind. The Kyrouaquian official eventually grows very flustered and marches out of the building in a huff.

Taking the Rebels to the spaceport by means of a maze of back streets, you stop next to a hangar building at the edge of the landing area just in time to see a number of Imperial stormtroopers quietly exiting from the cargo vessels. There are nearly a hundred in all. It is obvious that someone on Kyrouac's ruling council contacted the Empire about the presence of Rebel diplomats on the planet, and the Empire responded by quietly sneaking stormtroopers in on the cargo transports. There are enough of them to take over the city government as well. No doubt there is also a Star Destroyer hanging in orbit. Go to paragraph 54.

53. Walking a little farther, you look around again. Make another Perception roll: on a 5 or better, go to paragraph 29; if you roll less than 5, go to paragraph 53 (yes, this same paragraph).

54. There are 10 stormtroopers about halfway between you and the Rebel ship, which is 30 meters away.

The Rebel Commander slaps you on the back. "Do you know how to use one of these, kid?" he asks, handing you a holdout blaster. "We're going to have to make a run for our ship, and it would be safest for you to come with us."

That's just what you've been wanting.

To get to the ship, you can walk five meters a combat round, which doesn't count as an action, or you can run 10, which does count as an action. The holdout blasters that you and the Rebels are holding have a short range of three to four meters, a medium range of five to eight, and a long range of nine to 12. They have a damage code of 3D + 1. Each of the Rebels has a Blaster skill of 5D + 2, a Dodge of 4D + 1, and a Strength of 3D. The 10 stormtroopers are 15 meters away from you. They have blaster rifles, so you are always within their short-range designation; the weapons have a damage code of 5D. The stormtroopers have a Blaster skill of 3D, and a Strength code of 3D. They will not dodge your shots. If you brawl or melee with them, they have a Brawling code of 3D and a Brawling Parry of 3D—they have no melee weapons.

If you get past the stormtroopers, you can make it safely to the ship before any of the others can react. Whether you can get past the Imperial Star Destroyer in orbit is another adventure, but you have achieved your goal of joining the Rebel Alliance.

Wookiees Amok

By Timothy M. Ryan

Captain: "Hey, this isn't Hoth!"

Wookiee: "Uuoor arrghss gomm."

Captain: "What did the Wookiee say?"

Rebel 1: "That this is Branth, captain."

Captain: "So why is Branth here?"

Rebel 1: "Well, because millions of years ago tiny particles of space dust..."

Captain: "I mean why are we here?"

Wookiee: "Grraouau uahmm rauou."

Rebel 1: "He says that there is an Imperial prison base down there where his family is being held captive."

Captain: "Hey, wait a minute! I'm not going to be blaster fodder for this flea-bitten Kashyyykian carpet bag! Why should I risk my ship for..."

Wookiee: "GRRRAAOUUOO!"

Rebel 1: "He said..."

Captain: "I know what he said, you Sybrial brain slug. Just tell him to hurry up with the landing coordinates before I change my mind."

The Nuns of G'aav'aar'oon

(A Dark Side Scenario)

"You mean you want us to assassinate a nun?"

"You have religious objections?"

"No—it just seems a little odd."

"Lord Vader has ordered this mission. Are there any more questions?"

"When do we leave?"

“Great Just fantastic.” Platt curses sourly. She raps her fingers on her freighter’s smoldering control console. “There’s nothing like trying to blast out of Mos Eisley, then your ship decides it’s ready for the junkyard.” She looks through the cockpit viewport. Sand. Not dunes, just sand, piling higher every minute. Platt had ditched her ship, *Pok’s Demise*, in a Dune Sea gravel storm.

Platt reviews her escape, trying to figure out what has gone wrong. She’d been having a few with Sovar, her “cargo solicitor.” The cantina visit was a sort of payment for the crummy cargo he’d traded with her. Then the bounty hunters showed up. Platt dashed back to Docking Bay 86, ran on board *Pok’s Demise*, sealed the personnel and cargo hatches and punched it. She was out even before the bounty hunters could get off a shot.

Of course, in those rushed takeoffs, there wasn’t really time to run a full diagnostic check on the ship’s systems. Platt found that out two minutes later, when her maneuverability jets cut out. Then her ion drives. Then the main generator. No doubt her shield generators were a mound of slag right now. The nearest uncontrolled landing area was a few kilometers below: the Dune Sea. Platt did her best to angle the ship for a smooth crash. At least she didn’t feel too banged up.

Platt looks out the viewport. The sand completely covers it. “Well, if I have to wait out the storm, I might as well check out what’s left of my ship,” she sighs. There isn’t much. The ventral gun mount was torn off during the crash. The underbelly sensors are gone. Sand has filled the forward maintenance crawlways. The cabins are a mess. Bee-Zerobee hasn’t been secured; his remains are scattered all over the main corridor. So much for the droid. He had suffered enough.

Platt expects to find her cargo bay smeared with glaze cakes, the almost worthless cargo Sovar has stuck her with. Flashing the glow rod over the bulkhead, she can’t find even the smallest morsel of glaze. The containers are still secured in their webbing, but something has gnawed the top web straps away. The crate lids have been unlatched and tossed off. Platt looks inside one and sniffs around. She smells glaze cake and something else . . . something animal.

Platt hears scratching noises in a maintenance duct beneath the deck plates. Pipes clatter in the aft engineering station. Somebody is crawling around in there. Platt has run into sneaky shipjackers or stowaways before, but none could ever eat all those glaze cakes and manage to smell as bad as the crates do now.

She cautiously approaches the hatch to the aft engineering station. Platt takes the glow rod with her other hand and draws her blaster. With a swift

Who Is Platt Okeefe?

Some background on this well-established STAR WARS Roleplaying Game character

The massive commerce world of Brentaal has seen its share of space-faring heroes. Platt Okeefe is only the latest of many to leave the confines of her Core Worlds system and seek her fortune in the greater galaxy.

When she was 12, Platt ran away from home and signed on as a cabin steward aboard a Sullustan starliner. She later joined a tramp freighter crew plying the Anarid Cluster, and acquired a taste for fast ships, slick deals and living on the edge of the law.

In her early misadventures, Platt joined the infamous, Hutt-controlled Klatooinan Trade Guild, defaulted on payments for her first light freighter and was sold into slavery. Platt managed to escape her masters with the help of a fellow slave, a Twi’lek currently known as Tru’eb the gunrunner. The two became fast friends. Tru’eb helped secure funding for Platt’s new ship—the ill-fated *Pok’s Demise*—while in return Platt shared what she had learned about smuggling.

These days Platt runs illegal cargo to countless Outer Rim worlds. She’s distinguished by her platinum blonde hair, classy spacer outfits and a pleasant smile that reflects her easygoing nature. She’s a friend to fellow smugglers and a dangerous adversary to the bounty hunters and Imperial forces who seek to discontinue her “business” endeavors.

— P. S.

kick, her foot connects with the hatch’s controls. The metal door whines as it slowly opens. Platt flashes the glow rod and peers inside. Two large thumper feet pummel her to the deck. Several creatures with snouts pound over Platt. Some have nastily pointed horns. They skitter over her and off into some other part of the ship.

Platt pulls herself off the deck, cursing. *Pok’s Demise* has scurriers, vermin from Mos Eisley. She shines the glow rod into the engineering bay. Bits of machinery and starship parts are everywhere. The ion coil exchangers have been pulled into lots of little pieces. And two power coupling sheaths are gnawed straight through. The creatures have picked and pulled apart important components of almost every system.

Platt must have picked up the scurriers when Sovar came by to take her for that drink at the cantina: She had left her freighter’s cargo hatch open. “Well, there’s not much I can do about it now,” Platt says to nobody in particular. “The best I can do is sell this old heap to the Jawas for scrap.”

WHAT’S ROLEPLAYING?

Roleplaying is a form of the kids game “Let’s Pretend,” with slightly more sophisticated rules. Each person playing the game can take the part of his or her own *STAR WARS* hero (called a “character”): a Rebel pilot, a smuggler, a bounty hunter—even a Jedi Knight. One player is called a “gamemaster,” who acts as a storyteller. The gamemaster describes the scenes of the story to the players, who in turn decide what their characters are going to do. The players’ choices affect how the story unfolds. For details, read the *STAR WARS* Roleplaying Game sourcebooks from West End Games.



From deep within her ship, Platt figures the gravel storm has abated. The incessant hum outside has stopped. She presses the controls for the top-side hatch and stands back. It unlocks with a clank and groans open. An avalanche of sand pours in. When it stops (and Platt is relieved when it eventually does), she grabs a backpack of her personal and survival gear and pulls herself up through the hatch.

Tatooine's twin suns are just peeking above the horizon. From what Platt can see, her entire freighter is buried. With the transponder scrapped, nobody is going to find the starship in this wasteland. It will probably take the Jawas a few weeks before one of their sandcrawlers rumbles by this area. Platt knows she has to hike out of here on her own. But which way leads to the nearest settlement?

Platt jumps back in surprise as five scurriers pop out of the open hatch and race off into the desert. The pesky scavengers must be seeking out the nearest food source—garbage. Trash means there must be some kind of civilization around here. Platt kneels down and digs through her pack for the macrobinoculars. She climbs the nearest dune and focuses the macros, trying to track the scurriers.

There they are, already about a kilometer out, if her macrobinoculars' range readouts are correct. The numbers suddenly read four meters as a massive blur rises in her macros' viewscreen. A gigantic head and long neck burst out of the sand. Platt drops the macrobinoculars and stumbles backward in fear. She doesn't care if it's a sandworm, krayt dragon or worse. Platt just scrambles to clear her blaster of its holster. She's about to whirl and shoot whatever it is, when a warm snout playfully nuzzles her hair.

Platt looks up to see a ronto with an innocent smile on its snout. Its sand-flaps dangle from the back of its head. The beast coos as it rubs her hair again. "Hey, stop it," says Platt, gently pushing the ronto away. She gets up and dusts herself off. Platt notices a set of reins dangling from the animal's snout and a squarish saddle strapped to its back. She reaches up to scratch the ronto's neck. It bends down and licks her face. "Hey there, big fellah. Where's your rider? Poor creature, you must have been stuck out here during the gravel storm. I guess those sand-flaps helped protect you. Sometimes I wish I could curl up and wait out a sandstorm." The ronto just affectionately rubs its snout against Platt's hair.

Platt slings her backpack over one shoulder and approaches the ronto's saddle. There are no ropes or harnesses to climb. Turning its long neck to stare at her, the ronto knowingly kneels down on the sand. Platt grabs the saddle, steps onto the ronto's bent leg and swings herself up.

Settling into the awkward saddle, she pats the creature's neck. "Good fellah. Now, can you take me home?" The ronto looks back at her quizzically. "You know, *home*," says Platt insistently. "Food, water, civilization? Hello..." she says, patting its head. "Is there anything clicking in that tiny brain of yours? Look, fellah, if I don't find civilization, I can't hop a transport back to Mos Eisley. If

I make it that far, I have to find a new starship with bounty hunters all over my tail. But I'm not going *anywhere* unless you start walking. Get it?"

The ronto cranes its neck back and nuzzles her hair once more. "Look, you can mess up my hair as much as you want when we reach a settlement, okay?" Platt isn't sure if the creature understands. Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. Maybe it just feels like moving on. Anyway, the beast abruptly stands up and begins stomping off over the sand, following the same path the scurriers had moments before. Platt sighs. She pats the ronto's neck. "Good fellah." ☺

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Peter Schweighofer is a STAR WARS editor and writer for West End Games. This is his first contribution to SWGM.

SCURRIER

TYPE: Scavenger

DEXTERITY 3D - Running 4D. **PERCEPTION** 2D+2 - Sneak 3D+2. **STRENGTH** 2D+1 - Climbing/jumping 3D+2.

SPECIAL ABILITIES: **BITE:** Does STR damage. **HORNS (males only):** Do STR+1D damage. **MANIPULATION:** Scurriers' forepaws can manipulate small objects and pick apart machinery as if they had a repair skill of 4D.

MOVE: 15

SIZE: Up to 1.2 meters long

RONTO

TYPE: Beast of burden

DEXTERITY 2D - Running 3D. **PERCEPTION** 3D. **STRENGTH** 5D - Stamina 6D.

SPECIAL ABILITIES: **HEAT ENDURANCE:** Rontos are extremely adaptable to desert conditions, though they still need water to survive. **SENSE OF SMELL:** Rontos have a keen sense of smell. They add +1D to any PERCEPTION roll involving smell. **SKITTISH:** Rontos are easily upset by any machines that move significantly faster than they. Add +3D to their ORNERINESS when around fast-moving vehicles.

MOVE: 10

SIZE: 4.25 meters tall

ORNERINESS: 1D

35:6:16/CYN/NAR.4.SHD/TRD

Ralltiir Wide Open

Nar Shaddaa Node

With the official blockade still locked tight around the Ralltiir system, the corporate bulk cargo transports are effectively denied system access. Word has it that certain CSA contractors are attempting to obtain special exemptions from the Emperor, but until they do, anyone with the bolyatze to run the blockade is facing a captive and now desperate market.

Small cargo items in high demand are personal expendables, luxury foodstuffs, heavy-duty survival equipment and firearms. We would not advise transporting weapons if you cannot outrun an Imperial frigate, since the current penalty for being caught with such a cargo insystem is immediate execution.

Sharky's gang has reportedly already cracked the market, and if Bettle and Jaxa can find Doc and get the *Mallixer* souped up, we figure they'll be making the run as well. Nada Synnt (oh, *please*, Trooper ...) has been keeping his operatives away, but this must have changed with Tion's death, since Danken and a couple of others are definitely drifting in that direction. We're kind of surprised that Solo and the Wook aren't making a run, but they seem to be laying low these days. This certainly is their style ...

Cynabar's InfoNet

Rebel Strike: Mission To Dantooine

After the Galactic Empire obliterated his home planet of Alderaan, TIE pilot Tycho Celchu became disillusioned with his career and decided to jump ship. A few months later, he contacted the Rebel Alliance and agreed to meet on Dantooine to defect.

The Rebel's Red Squadron, led by Commander Luke Skywalker, was then sent over to Dantooine to meet up with Tycho Celchu and extract him. Six starfighters—three T-65B X-wing starfighters and 3 BTL Y-wing starfighters, were sent on the mission. Upon arrival from hyperspace at Dantooine, however, Sarkli alerts the squadron with the fact that a large concentration of

Imperial forces was within the area. Tycho Celchu then contacted Red Squadron desperately telling them to abort the mission, as his defection had been discovered by the imperials. His TIE interceptor was shot down by the time he attempted to warn them. Skywalker then told his squadron they needed to get him out of there.

"You got here just in time. We've got to get out of here."
—Celchu to Skywalker

As a result, Red Squadron revised their extraction mission for it to become a rescue mission. The strike team landed on the planet, with Skywalker and Sarkli proceeding on foot and also ambushing two Scout Troopers nearby. Sarkli managed to take them out by causing a rockslide with his blaster, and the Red Squadron leader Luke Skywalker congratulated Sarkli before he went off on his own on a 74-Z speeder bike. Sarkli wanted to come with him, but was convinced by Skywalker to guard the landing zone with the rest of the team, while updating Skywalker via comlink. When he had reached the destination point, Celchu had already been loaded by stormtroopers and storm commandos threatening that any secrets that Celchu managed to uncover while spying for the Rebels would die with him, onto an APC destined for one of the landed Imperial transports. Skywalker dismounted and ran on foot towards an E-web emplacement. Skywalker took control of several more E-webs as the APC moved out of their fields of fire. Heavy blaster fire from the cannons disabled the vehicle and allowed Celchu the chance to escape.

Celchu grabbed another speederbike, and the two pilots raced toward the other side of the canyon, with Celchu guiding the way. The route was bombarded by TIE/sa bombers, resulting in the deaths of several strike team members, and Sarkli reported that they were under attack.

Skywalker and Celchu had to avoid more Imperials and the bombers, jumping their bikes over a chasm. During their escape, Sarkli contacted them telling them that they were currently under attack and telling them to hurry up and get out of there. When they arrived at the encampment, they discovered the only survivor was Sarkli. The pilots left the planet in the three remaining X-wings and returned to the Rebellion. When Skywalker asked who was trying to arrest Celchu, Celchu explains that they were members of the Storm commandos, elite soldiers tasked with acquiring weapons for the Empire, and reported that he had information regarding a plan to capture scientists.

*"Master, one of our officers has defected to the Rebellion. It is believed that he has supplied them with valuable information.
It is of no consequence. Our forces have already blockaded the planet Ralltiir."*
—Darth Vader reports to Emperor Palpatine

Celchu would supply the Alliance with intelligence that several scientists situated on the planet Ralltiir wished to defect to the Alliance, but had been discovered. They were trapped in the main city, protected by a force field, the only thing protecting them. Celchu requested that the squadron help extract them before the Imperials got to them. Luke then commented that he knows of a pilot who could rescue the researchers in time after deciding that they should alert the Alliance to send a rescue team to Ralltiir. In that same battle, another defection occurred. That time: Rebel lieutenant Sarkli ended up defecting to the Empire.

Likewise, Darth Vader reported to Emperor Palpatine about Celchu's defection, although Palpatine believed that whatever information he gave to the Rebel Alliance about their plan to capture scientists on Ralltiir was of no consequence, as they already blockaded the planet.

Celchu would later become a successful member of the Rebel Alliance, later flying for the successor to Red Squadron, Rogue Squadron.

Rebel Omonda Faces Execution

Imperial City, Coruscant

Canna Omonda, former senator of Chandrila and protégé of Mon Mothma, yesterday submitted a written and oral confession in which she admitted to acts of treason against the Empire.

Long known for her fiery rhetoric and abrasive opinions of the Emperor and his policies, Omonda finally tested the tolerance of the Emperor after remarks she made to the media after the Senate was disbanded. Anxious to afford her the opportunity to clear her name and reaffirm her loyalty to the Empire, Emperor Palpatine personally asked her to return to Coruscant for a short interview with High Inquisitor Halmere, and sent an honor escort of three Imperial Star Destroyers to Chandrila to accompany her back to Coruscant.

During a press conference today, Gretta Spinbalio, a spokeswoman for Halmere's office, announced Omonda's confession. According to Spinbalio, Halmere and his aides were quite surprised when Omonda began sobbing shortly into the interview. She went on to confess that she had for some time been passing on to Rebel spies classified information she had access to as an Imperial Senator of a ranking Core World. She also disclosed the names and location of her Rebel contacts (all of whom have been subsequently arrested), and disclosed information regarding the Rebel leadership.

Palpatine was reportedly shocked and upset when informed of this news. "I have always valued Omonda's counsel and advice," he said in his before-dinner remarks at the Palace that evening. "After all, no leader is so wise and great he cannot benefit from criticism. Sadly, while seeing Omonda return to the Imperial fold pleases me, the penalty for high treason is quite specific. However much I may wish to do so, I cannot spare her now and remain true to my pledges to honor law and order above all else. The Empire will miss her." Omonda is scheduled for execution during Fete Week.

Coruscant Daily NewsFeed

Winner Lose All

Every sabacc tournament, Lando Calrissian had learned over the years, had its own special flavor and texture. Games on the upper levels of Imperial Center and other Core worlds were elegant and refined. Games run by other gamblers were more intense, populated by players acutely aware that the winners would go home rich while the losers might not eat for a few days. Games run by Hutts or Hutt clients usually involved blasters at least once before the final hand.

But it wasn't until he walked through the doors of the High Card Casino in Danteel City that Lando had felt an atmosphere he could truly label as electric.

Small wonder. Veilred Jydor, master gambler, financier, and the High Card's owner, was giving away his Tchine.

Lando actually hadn't even heard of the Tchines when the tournament was announced two standard weeks earlier. But it hadn't taken long to get up to speed. The Tchines were a set of sculptures sometimes called the Seven Sisters: slender, thirty-centimeter-tall figurines, delicately humanoid, created from a unique and incredibly tough gray stone by an unknown and certainly ancient artisan. Even more mysterious was the fact that all seven figurines were identical.

Lando hadn't believed that part at first. But as he sifted through the HoloNet and read the reports, he was forced to the same conclusion that all the rest of the researchers over the years had been forced to. However impossibly it had been done, the sculptures were indeed perfectly and precisely identical.

There were many strange things throughout the galaxy, and Lando had learned to take them in philosophical stride. What raised the Tchines above the level of mere academic interest was the fact that each one was valued at between forty and fifty million credits. And Jydor was offering his as the tournament's prize. Winner take all.

A pair of Rodians shoved their way past Lando, nearly knocking him over. He caught his balance and forced back his reflexive annoyance. He'd never seen those particular Rodians before, but with an incredibly valuable art object up for grabs he expected to see a lot of unfamiliar faces before this was over.

Speculation was rampant as to the reason Jydor had suddenly decided to part with one of his collectible treasures, the most popular theory being that he'd made some bad investments and needed to raise a stack of credits fast.

If so, he'd found the perfect way to do it. There were eight seats at the tournament table, with six of them going for ten million credits each. All six had been instantly snatched up, which meant that before the game even started Jydor was up ten to twenty million over where he'd have been if he'd simply sold or auctioned off the statuette. And that didn't take into account the extra visitors the game was drawing to his casino and the attached hotel.

Just to add to the excitement-and to swell the ranks of the crowd-he'd announced that the final two places at the table would be going to the winners of a preliminary wild-card tournament.

Lando meant to win one of those seats.

Ahead, in the direction the crowd flow was taking him, he could see a floating holo marking the sign-up table. Keeping an eye out for familiar faces, especially familiar faces who might be carrying grudges, Lando headed toward it.

"Well, well," Tavia Kitik murmured from across the dining table in the tapcaf overlooking the High Card's grand entryway.

Bink Kitik looked up from the delectable shrimpi cup she was currently eating her way around to find her twin sister gazing out at the crowd of hopefuls headed toward the registration table. "Well, well, what?" she asked.

"Another familiar face," Tavia said with a microscopic nod. "Lando Calrissian."

At the third corner of the table, Zerba Cher'dak stirred. "I've heard that name before," he murmured.

"Probably," Bink agreed. "Possibly from us."

"We've run into Lando on and off over the years," Tavia added. "A pleasant, relatively cultured sort."

"Only because we're cute," Bink said drily. Casually turning her head, she followed Tavia's eye line into the crowd of players, would-be players, and soon-to-be spectators.

It was Lando, all right. He was weaving his way upstream through the crowd, a blue data card in his hand and an intent but satisfied expression on his face. "Looks like he's got a spot on the blue track," she added. "Roving eye or not, the man does aim high."

"So he's here to play," Zerba muttered. "Wonderful."

"Relax," Bink said. "He's on the blue track; you're on the red. Who knows? Maybe you'll both win seats at the big table."

"I don't plan on hanging around long enough to find out," Zerba countered. "I'm more wondering if he'll spot one of you and give the whole game away."

"Don't worry, Lando's smarter than that," Tavia assured him. "He's seen us work, and he knows better than to address us by name in public."

"At least not until he knows what our current names are," Bink added. "He's heard half a dozen of them over the years."

"Wait a minute," Zerba said. He leaned forward, as if better proximity to the two women would give the antenepalps concealed in his lacquered hair better access to their thoughts or emotions, or whatever it was Balosars were currently claiming their antenepalps could do. "He's seen you work? He knows you're a ghost thief?"

"Yes, and yes," Bink said. "And Tavia's right. He's not going to turn us in."

Zerba gave a little snort. "Anyone can be bought, Bink," he said. "It's just a question of price. Maybe I should switch to the blue track and made sure he gets bounced before he sees you."

"No," Tavia said firmly. "Lando hasn't done anything to deserve that." She looked at Bink. "Besides, he looks hungry. I'm guessing he needs a score."

"When hasn't he?" Bink agreed. "Not likely to happen here, though, not with the big names Jydor's already got at the table. Relax, Zerba. Whatever happens, he's not going to be a problem."

"Whatever you say," Zerba said, still not looking convinced. "Just remember, if you get caught I have no idea where you got that fancy dress and keycard." With that, he returned his attention to his plate.

Bink looked across the table at Tavia. Her sister had also resumed eating her dinner, but there was a stiffness in her shoulders that hadn't been there earlier.

Probably she was just ramping up her concern level as the timer ticked down toward the job. Tavia hated the whole ghost-thief business and would be worried from the moment Bink headed up to Jydor's hundredth-floor penthouse until the moment she returned with whatever loot she was able to grab from his art display room.

Or maybe she was worried about Lando, and Zerba's all-too-true reminder that anyone could indeed be bought.

The moment had arrived, and Jydor was playing it like a true showman.

Not that it was easy to see from the table against the far wall where Lando had been seated for his first game. The double line of guards crossing the High Card's grand ballroom was little more than a stately procession of big, heavily armed men. Jydor was just another figure in the middle of the bunch, though he was far more elegantly dressed, in a mid-length layered tunic with a blue plume-feather upswept collar that contrasted nicely with his red-frosted white hair. The Tchine statue, which he carried in front of him in a protective transparisteel pyramid as if it were the royal Alderaanian crown or something, was visible only as a small, slender, gray lump.

Still, Lando counted himself lucky that he was in the ballroom at all. A lot of the players who'd made the cut had landed in various outlying rooms, where they would be refereed by the casino's game judges and watched over via unobtrusive cam droids hovering close to the high ceilings.

The procession ended at the round sabacc table that had been set up on the top level of a two-tier platform in the center of the ballroom. As the guards

formed themselves into protective circles on the floor and the lower tier, Jydor climbed to the upper tier and carefully set the pyramid and figurine in the center of the table. "Herewith is the prize," he intoned, his voice booming through the ballroom's speakers. "Winner take all."

He stepped back, seated himself in the chair usually reserved for the game judge, and raised a dramatic hand. "Let the games begin."

With a deep breath, Lando turned his attention back to his table. The player who'd been chosen by lot to deal this first hand, a smooth man with a permanent half smile plastered across his face, was already shuffling the cards.

I can do this, Lando thought firmly. Flexing his fingers in anticipation, watching closely to make sure the dealer wasn't playing fast and loose with the cards, he prepared his mind for the game.

"Well?" Bink asked quietly.

"I count twenty guards." Tavia's equally quiet voice came from the comlink clip on Bink's shoulder. "Four appear to be newcomers, probably brought in from one of Jydor's other properties. The others are all from his penthouse rotation."

Which meant the art display room three hundred meters above their heads was effectively deserted. With a forty-million-credit art object on public display, Jydor's security setup had been rearranged exactly as she'd anticipated. "Keep an eye on them," she said. "I'm going in."

The hotel's main turbolifts were arranged in three banks just outside the ballroom. An open car was waiting as she arrived, with half a dozen people filing in. Bink slipped in among them and punched for the ninety-ninth floor, the one directly beneath Jydor's penthouse. It would have been more convenient to ride all the way to the top, but none of the public turbolifts went to that floor, and Jydor hadn't been careless enough to pull the guards off his private turbolifts to add to the ballroom contingent.

Fingering her small, clutch-type handbag, she watched the indicator and waited for the car to clear out.

The last person finally exited on the eightieth floor. As the car doors closed again, Bink slipped a small egg-shaped device from a fold of her dress and cupped it in the palm of her right hand, then turned her handbag on its side and balanced it on her left palm. The turbolift passed the ninety-eighth floor, and as it slowed to a halt, she activated the egg's hidden trigger.

Her thin silk dress vanished instantly, ripped along its tear-away seams, the pieces pulled into the egg by the nearly invisible attaching threads to reveal the demure white-trimmed black uniform that had been hidden beneath it. Opening her handbag, she pulled out the pair of compressed hand towels that had been squeezed inside, quickly fluffed and refolded them, then slipped the handbag and egg into concealment between them.

When the turbolift doors opened, it wasn't an elegantly dressed guest who stepped out into the corridor, merely one of the casino's maids on her way to deliver some towels.

She headed down the corridor, taking on the quiet, unassuming posture and expression she'd noted on all of the casino's service staff. On any other floor this masquerade wouldn't have been necessary-after all, few overnight visitors knew who else was sharing a floor with them, or whose room was whose. And even a rookie ghost thief would know that hotel staff were normally forbidden to use the guest turbolifts.

But there was a subtle trap in play here on the ninety-ninth floor, one that same rookie ghost thief might have walked straight into. Fortunately for Bink, Tavia had done her homework. The rooms up here were a special group, a mixture of VIP guests, the casino's upper managers, and off-duty bodyguards. On this floor, and really on this floor alone, there was a good chance that everyone had at least a passing acquaintance with everyone else. A total stranger, no matter how elegantly dressed, would likely raise enough suspicion for a closer look.

But not even managers noticed the service staff. As long as Bink made it off the turbolift without anyone witnessing that policy violation, she should be fine.

She had a chance to prove that theory twice on the way down the hallway as well-dressed visitors strode past her without even breaking stride. Reaching her target room, she knocked discreetly on the door and then pulled out her keycard and slid it into the slot. The keycard, unlike the uniform, was genuine

casino-issue, lifted two hours earlier from a maid who was heading off-duty. The card Zerba had left in its place was an exact copy, though of course without any of the access coding. Since even the best keycards occasionally suffered scratch degradation, the maid would most likely never even realize it had been switched. The first time she tried to use it, which probably wouldn't be until tomorrow, she would almost certainly simply go to the housekeeping supervisor and get it reprogrammed.

The room was deserted, as Bink had known it would be, given that its occupant was one of the men currently guarding Jydor's Tchine. Going to the refresher, she tucked her towel bundle into a corner and added her maid outfit to the stack, leaving herself dressed in her usual working catsuit. Tavia's research had shown a narrow access crawl space between the ninety-ninth and hundredth floors that contained some of the emergency systems, and access panels into such spaces were often hidden in refresher linen closets.

There was no such panel in this one. But three minutes' work with her mono-edge wheel cutter and she'd made one of her own. Pushing the disconnected slab of ceiling ceramic out of the way into the crawl space, she pulled herself up.

If her calculations were correct, she was now directly beneath Jydor's art display room.

The next step was to see what kind of internal security the room had. Pulling out her microdrill, she got to work.

The penthouse flooring was considerably tougher than the closet ceiling had been. But the drill was heavy-duty, and within another five minutes she had a pinhole punched through. Swapping out the drill for her optic line viewer, she worked it through the opening and adjusted the eyepiece over her eye.

Now to figure out how hard it would be to get through the display room's heavy, vault-class door. Turning the optic line in that direction, she keyed for light and full magnification.

She'd expected Jydor to be the type to trade extra security for convenience, and she was right. The door was an open-back design, where the mechanism was visible through a protective layer of transparisteel. That sort of setup made it easier for the owner to change the combination; it also made it easier

for someone other than the owner to see straight into the coding bars and figure out the sequence. A couple of minutes' study, and she had it.

Of course, getting into the suite and to the door presented its own set of challenges. But it should be easy enough. An exit from the window of the room below her, a quick climb up the wall using her syntherope dispenser and some rock putty anchors, a popped catch on the ventilation aperture at the top of the window-after disabling the alarms, of course-a twitched noose through the aperture to trip the catch on the main window, and she would be in. Nothing to it.

And now came the fun part: figuring out what would be worth stealing.

Turning the optic line again, she began a slow sweep of the room. It was every bit as lovely a sight as she'd hoped it would be. The Tchine might be Jydor's priciest art object, but there were plenty of lesser artifacts in the display room that should keep her and Tavia in food and shelter for a couple of months. There was a Vomfrey sculpture on one of the nearest display pillars that would probably bring a few thousand credits. The antique Bocohn medtext hardbook would be trickier to fence, but would be worth a lot more if she could find someone who would take it. On another pillar on the far side of the Bocohn, hidden from the room's entrance by a half-draped black cloth, was a square transparisteel case.

Bink felt her whole body stiffen. Inside the case was a Tchine figurine.

For a long moment she just gazed at it. Then, reaching to her collar, she keyed her comlink clip. "Tav?"

"Yes?" her sister's voice came instantly.

"Is Jydor's Tchine still in the ballroom?"

There was a short pause. "Yes, of course."

"You can see it?"

"Of course. Is something wrong?"

Bink took a careful breath. Jydor had one Tchine. Just one. Every data list agreed on that.

So if Jydor's Tchine was here, what was on the table in the ballroom?

"Bink?"

"I'm coming down," Bink said, pulling the optic line from the pinhole and packing it and the eyepiece away. "Meet me in the lounge. Any idea when Zerba will be free?"

"There's supposed to be a quarter-hour break every three hours," Tavia said. "You're not going in?"

"Not yet," Bink said as she started working her way back down through the opening she'd cut. "We may have just changed targets."

"No," Zerba said firmly. "All Seven Sisters are accounted for."

"You're sure?" Bink asked.

"Three on Imperial Center," Zerba said, lifting fingers. "One on Rendili, one on Corellia, one across town with that Devaronian noble-whatever her name is--"

"Lady Carisica Vanq," Tavia murmured.

"Right-Lady Vanq," Zerba said. "And one with Jydor. That's seven."

"You're sure there couldn't be an eighth?" Bink asked hesitantly, wondering if the question would sound stupid.

From the look on Zerba's face, it apparently did. "The Sisters were discovered three hundred standard years ago," he said. "They've been bought, sold, and traded among the elite for two hundred ninety-nine and a half of those years. Trust me, if someone had found an eighth, we'd have heard about it."

"Ditto if another collector had sold his to Jydor," Tavia added. "Big sales and trades are covered by the upscale news feeds, and I've been watching all of them lately." She looked at Zerba. "Which leaves just one possibility."

"Jydor's built himself a fake," Zerba said heavily. "Question is, which one is which?"

Bink gazed off across the lounge, crowded with players rushing to get food and drink during the brief time-out. "He wouldn't bring the fake down here," she said, trying to work it through. "Someone might spot that."

"But then how would he make the switch at the end?" Zerba objected. "I assume he is planning to foist off the fake as the genuine article."

"The tournament's going to last at least a couple more days," Tavia pointed out. "I doubt he'll leave the Tchine here overnight. It could be he's got the real one there right now, and plans to switch it for the fake at the beginning of the final day."

"On the other hand, why not just bring in the fake at the beginning and be done with it?" Zerba countered. "It has to be good enough to pass eventual inspection, after all." He gestured toward the ballroom. "Besides, the people in there are gamblers, not art experts. I doubt any of them has ever gotten closer to a Tchine than a holo on a data list."

Tavia stirred. "Except maybe Lando," she murmured.

"True," Bink said, frowning as she thought back to the incident Tavia was referring to. How close had Lando been to the Tchine? She couldn't remember.

"Wait a second," Zerba said. "You're talking about the Lando who's in the game? When did he see a Tchine?"

"He was at Qarshan's game a few years back when Nintellor made that famous bet where he put half his collection on the table," Tavia said. "Nintellor's Tchine was part of that bet."

"Nintellor won it back, but the Tchine was right there in the open," Bink added. "I wonder if we should bring Lando in and see what he knows."

"Why?" Zerba asked. "I mean, why do we even care?"

"Because it would be embarrassing for me to grab the wrong one," Bink told him.

Zerba's eyes widened. "Whoa-back up, back up. What do you mean, grab the wrong one? We're not going after the Tchine."

"We weren't going after the Tchine," Bink corrected. "But that was before we had an actual possible shot at it."

"You're joking," Zerba breathed, his eyes going even wider. "Please tell me you're joking."

"Look, Jydor is running some sort of scam," Bink said. "If part of that scam requires him to leave his most precious art object unguarded, we owe it to the galaxy to teach him a proper lesson."

Zerba stared at her another moment, then turned to her sister. "Tavia?" he pleaded.

Tavia sighed. "I'm on your side," she said. "But I've seen her in this mood. She's not going to back down."

"Hey, you're the one who always says you should set your sights high," Bink reminded her. "That's all I'm doing."

"That isn't what I meant," Tavia said with that patient look Bink had seen on her so many times over the years. "But you know that. How do you suggest we start?"

"Like I said: we bring in Lando."

"You're insane," Zerba insisted. "Both of you. Completely insane."

"Oh, come on, Zerba," Bink said, mock-severely. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Cowering behind my sense of self-preservation," Zerba retorted. "Look, Bink, whatever game Jydor's playing, it has to be for huge stakes. Can't we please just grab something he won't care about and get out of here?"

"Let's at least talk to Lando," Bink said. "If we decide the Tchine's too risky, we'll go back to the original plan."

Zerba eyed her. "You promise?"

"I promise."

He sighed. "You're the boss. But I still don't like it."

"Noted," Bink said. "Tav? You want to do the honors?"

There was a warning hoot from the ballroom's speakers. "Sure," Tavia said. "Next break's in three hours?"

"Yes," Zerba said, standing up. "Unless he loses before then."

"Then we'll meet here in three hours," Tavia said. She raised her eyebrows. "All of us."

"Sure," Zerba said sourly. "Wouldn't miss it for anything." He headed back toward the ballroom.

"You really think Lando can help us?" Tavia asked.

Bink shrugged. "He couldn't hurt. He's also smart and he knows gamblers better than we do." She cocked an eyebrow. "Besides, you think he's cute."

"You think he's cute," Tavia said stiffly. "Not me."

Bink suppressed a smile. "Right."

As far back as he could remember, Lando had always had an eye for the ladies. Even in the midst of a sabacc game, occasionally even when the other players were standing over him with drawn blasters, a passing beauty would still trip a switch in some back corner of his brain.

Fortunately, most of the time those distractions didn't rise to the level of potentially lethal. Nonetheless, the ladies passing through his life always caught his attention.

Which was probably why, even while facing an uphill climb in a tournament with stakes as immensely high as this one, he still managed to spot the twins Bink and Tavia at the far end of the ballroom.

Not that they looked like twins at the moment. Even at this distance he could see that they were using their usual tricks of makeup, hairstyle, and carefully positioned hats to create the illusion that their faces were merely similar instead of identical. There were times when Bink's schemes relied heavily on that accident of nature; even when that wasn't a part of her plan, there was no reason to advertise the fact that they were twins.

Under normal circumstances, Lando would have known not to approach them or even acknowledge that he knew them. But the circumstances here were hardly normal. The women were undoubtedly up to something-he'd never heard of them going anywhere just for their health-and he had no intention of letting them derail the tournament. Not without at least knowing what they were planning. Certainly not while he still had a chance of winning.

Which meant he was going to have to confront them. The question was how to do so without potentially ruining things for himself or them.

The next break had been called, and he was still working on the problem as he headed toward the bar with the rest of the players when one of the twins sidled up beside him and took his arm. "Hello, Lando," she murmured in his ear. "Thirsty?"

"Always," Lando assured her. "You have a table?"

"Right over there," she said. "Bink's already ordered your favorite cognac."

"Great," Lando said. So it was Tavia hanging on to his arm, not Bink. Good thing mental bets didn't count against the tournament's single-elimination. "Lead the way."

They found Bink seated at a small corner table at the rear of the lounge along with a dour-faced human male. Bink did the introductions as Lando and Tavia sat down. "Lando; Zerba." The crisp professionalism in her voice ended Lando's last lingering hope that this was a social gathering. "Zerba; Lando."

"Zerba," Lando said, nodding. The other wasn't actually human, he realized now, but a near-human, probably a Balosar. "What's up?"

"Fasten your restraints," Bink advised. "There's a hell of a ride ahead."

Lando listened with a growing mixture of fascination and disbelief as she described her probe into Jydor's display room and what she'd seen there. "So what do you think?" she asked when she'd finished.

"I think Jydor's angling for an early grave," Lando said, looking around the lounge. "There are some big players here, and their patrons aren't going to be happy if he tries to pass off a fake."

"I didn't know gamblers had patrons," Bink said.

"They do on this one," Lando told her. "None of them could have managed a ten-million-credit buy-in on their own. I'm guessing the six players already in the game have been hired and funded by individual collectors to play on their behalf."

"Makes sense," Zerba commented. "It gives the collectors a better chance of winning than if they played themselves. It also masks their identities, which can be handy."

"Like sending a ringer to an auction," Bink agreed. "So what's Jydor's game?"

"No idea," Lando said. "Unless one of the players is secretly working for Jydor. If he can win the Tchine back; but then why bother with a fake in the first place?"

"Well, whatever the plan, the first thing we have to do is figure out which figurine is which," Bink said. "Any chance we could get a little closer to the one down here? Preferably with a small scanner in hand?"

Zerba gave a snort. "Sure," he said. "All we need to do is win one of the wild-card seats. Then we'll be right up there with it."

"Or win both seats," Bink suggested. "You two are on different tracks, you know."

Lando eyed Zerba. "What's your ranking?" he asked.

"Don't have one," Zerba said. "Don't need one, either." He smiled tightly. "I cheat."

Lando swallowed. A lot of sabacc players cheated. Few of them admitted it. "Really."

"Really," Zerba confirmed.

"He's quite good at it, too," Bink added. "Sleight of hand, reshuffles, skifters-you name it, he can do it."

"I've got a couple of spare skifters, if you want one," Zerba offered.

"No, thanks," Lando said. The last thing he wanted was to get caught with an adjustable card in his possession. "I trust you know what happens if you get caught."

"I do," Zerba assured him. "And I won't."

"Right." Lando picked up his glass and drained the last of his cognac. "In that case, I guess things are on hold until we see if we can win one of the wild-card spots. Or both of them," he added, inclining his head to Bink.

"May I make a suggestion?" Tavia spoke up.

Lando looked at her, feeling a mild flicker of surprise. She'd been so quiet since they sat down that he'd almost forgotten she was there. "Sure."

"You've seen a real Tchine close up," she reminded Lando. "But none of the rest of us has. More important, we really don't know how one shows up on a scan."

"Isn't that data on file?" Lando asked.

"Some of it is," Tavia said. "But not all of it. Probably deliberately."

"So that no one knows all of the readings that would have to be faked to make a copy," Lando said, nodding. "Makes sense."

"So we don't have complete sensor data," Zerba said. "So what?"

"So there's another Tchine right across town," Tavia said. "Lady Carisica Vanq's. If we could persuade her to let us take some readings, we'd have a head start on identifying the fake."

"I'm guessing that'll take a lot of persuasion," Lando murmured.

"Maybe not," Bink said thoughtfully. "Depends on how much security she has."

Tavia gave her sister a look of strained patience. "Bink-

She broke off as the warning hoot sounded. "You two sort it out," Lando said, standing up. "Zerba and I need to get back to the tables."

"How soon before you find out if you've made it to the main game?" Bink asked.

"I don't know," Lando said, running a quick calculation. "Not before tonight, though."

"Probably not until sometime tomorrow," Zerba said. "Depending on how late in the day the session runs, Jydor may postpone the beginning of the big game until the day after that."

"So you've got until then to break into Lady Vanq's house," Lando concluded. "Have fun."

He headed back toward the ballroom, wondering if there was any reason for him not to simply turn around and walk out of the casino. If he was going through all this for a fake...

He smiled tightly. No, of course he was going to keep going. There were a lot of big players here, and if he could help expose a scam before one of them was taken in, he would have bought himself a fistful of goodwill and possible future favors. In his line of business, both could mean the difference between success and failure.

Sometimes even between life and death.

"Thank you," Tavia said quietly as she and Bink reached the end of the long hedge-lined walkway of Lady Carisica Vanq's estate and came within sight of the main house. "I appreciate you trying it this way first."

"You're welcome," Bink said.

Tavia winced. Bink was trying hard to make it sound like she meant it, but Tavia knew her sister's moods and body language, and she could tell that Bink thought this was a waste of time. Worse, she probably thought that asking politely and straightforwardly for a scan would alert Lady Vanq to the more clandestine approach Bink obviously expected they would eventually have to use.

On one level, Tavia had to agree. Still, it seemed only right to try the polite approach first.

They reached the door, and Tavia rang the chime.

There was a moment's pause, and then the door swung ponderously open to reveal an LOM protocol droid. "Yes?" it asked stiffly.

"Lady Pounceable and Lady Michelle to see Lady Vanq," Bink said in that condescending, high-snoot-value voice she'd spent years perfecting.

"Lady Vanq is not at home," the droid said.

"Do you expect her back soon?" Bink asked.

"I cannot say," the droid said. "She has gone on a long journey."

Out of the corner of her eye, Tavia saw Bink cock her head slightly. Probably wondering whether they should give the LOM a high-power jolt into its motivator from her concealed sparker and simply walk in right now.

Fortunately, Bink was smarter than that. "Very well," she said. "We'll call another time."

"Yes," the droid said. Taking a step back, it closed the door.

"Now what?" Tavia asked. Her sister, she noted, was giving the house and windows a casually penetrating visual examination. "Plan B?"

"Actually, it was always Plan A," Bink said. She finished her survey and turned away from the house. "Let's get back to the casino."

"We're not hitting it tonight, are we?"

"No," Bink assured her. "First I need to dig up everything we can on the old-what is she?"

Tavia suppressed a sigh. For Bink, objects and targets were everything. People were just what you had to deal with along the way. "Devaronian."

"Right-the old Devaronian," Bink said. "We'll want her house schematics, her alarm setup, and any servant or droid information we can get. We'll work out a plan tonight and go in tomorrow."

Tavia thought back on the timing Lando and Zerba had laid out. "I hope that won't be too late," she warned. "If the wild-card rounds finish tonight, the main game will begin tomorrow."

"Not a chance," Bink said flatly. "With every game the field's average talent goes up a notch, which means the last few games will be long and brutal. No, the final table isn't going to start until the day after tomorrow at the earliest."

"I suppose," Tavia murmured. "I wonder if Zerba or Lando will make it through."

"That's their problem." Bink nodded back over her shoulder at the house. "This is ours. Come on-we've got work to do."

Lando had known going in that his chances of making it all the way to the big table were extremely slim. There were a lot of players who'd swarmed in for the tournament, and many of them were as good as or better than he was.

But for once, Lady Luck seemed to be solidly at his side. Often the better players drew positions where they were competing at other tables and more often than not ended up taking one another out. On the occasions when he

faced someone whose skills were superior to his own, the cards invariably ran in Lando's favor.

In a normal tournament, that kind of luck wouldn't gain him more than a temporary reprieve. In the long run, the whims of fortune would even out, and the better player would eventually emerge triumphant. But Jydor had set up the wild-card games to be single-elimination, which meant Lando only had to hold off his equals and betters for a single game each.

As the afternoon turned to evening and then to night, he slowly but steadily made his way from the edge of the ballroom inward toward the elevated table. By the time the games were called for the night, he was more than halfway toward his goal. Exhausted but with a deep satisfaction he hadn't felt in a long time, he watched as the bodyguards formed their protective curtain around Jydor and the Tchine and they all marched from the ballroom and disappeared into the private turbolifts.

He hadn't seen Bink or Tavia since that one meeting, but he caught a glimpse of Zerba as the players filed out and began dispersing to their own rooms. Apparently, the Balosar had also survived the night's combat.

It was a good sign, he decided as he settled tiredly into bed in his own modest room. He could only hope Bink and Tavia were making similar progress.

The games downstairs were still going strong when Bink finally conceded defeat to her drooping eyelids and said her good nights. Tavia muttered a distracted good night in return, the bulk of her attention clearly still on the array of four datapads laid out in front of her.

Bink ran quickly through her pre-bedtime routine, wondering yet again at the complicated dance that must go on inside her sister's head. For someone who hated the whole idea of stealing from people, Tavia nevertheless threw her whole heart, mind, and strength into the prep work that went into each job. Obviously, she was trying to make sure Bink made it through without getting caught; but the whole thing was still an interesting and no doubt tension-filled compromise between ethics and sisterly love.

Or maybe it was the challenge of the hunt that intrigued Tavia, the art and science of digging through floor plans and alarm zones as she searched for weaknesses and opportunities.

In some ways, Bink knew, the two of them really weren't all that different.

By the time Bink awoke the next morning, the entry plan was finished and laid out on her datapad. Moving quietly so as not to wake her sleeping sister, she got herself a cup of caf and settled down to study the plan.

She was halfway through her second cup by the time she finished her examination. It would work, she decided as she gazed thoughtfully out the window at the city stretching toward the horizon. A nighttime sortie; and by the time the games once again broke for the night, she and Tavia should have a complete sensor scan of Carisica Vanq's Tchine. All they would need then would be close access to the figurine Jydor had on display in the ballroom.

Hopefully, Lando and Zerba would make that happen.

"I just heard from Zerba." Tavia's voice came softly over Bink's comlink clip. "He and Lando are both still in the game."

"Glad to hear it," Bink murmured back, studying the bedroom window as she hung in midair half a meter from the glass. The defenses at the edge of Lady Vanq's grounds had been easy enough to penetrate, and she'd avoided the lower wall sensors by the simple expedient of using her syntherope dispenser to travel from hedge top to roof and then come down to her target window from the eaves. Now, as she swung gently back and forth in the warm night air, the last barrier lay before her.

As barriers went, it wasn't much. Satisfying herself that she'd spotted all the alarms and sensors, she pulled out her mono-edge wheel cutter and got to work. Five minutes later, with the glass cut, the alarm disabled, and the window open, she eased herself carefully inside.

Most collectors Bink had gone after over the years had situated their vaults or display rooms near their offices or, if they enjoyed showing off their collections, near the conversation room or some other public area. Lady Carisica Vanq's vault, in contrast, was right off her bedroom.

That wasn't entirely unheard of-Bink had known of other, mostly elderly, art hoarders who liked to look over their lifetimes' accomplishments every night before retiring. But it wasn't very common. It was rare enough, in fact, that

Tavia had speculated that the vault had actually started life as a safe room and only been retasked after Lady Vanq decided that life in Danteel City was safe enough not to require a place of instant refuge.

Breaking into someone's bedroom always made Bink a little nervous. The house droid had said Lady Vanq was out, but for all their electronic memories, droids occasionally got things wrong.

The room was dark, the only illumination coming from the muted city light leaking in through the drapes across the row of windows. Bink moved carefully across the floor, noting the shadowy shapes of chairs and lounge tables and wondering idly what sort of furnishings a wealthy Devaronian noble would indulge in. The bed was a little too big for her taste, with tall posts at each corner rising nearly to the ceiling and lifting the main part of the bed about half a meter off the floor. Probably an airflow thing, she decided, for nights when the temperature outside was uncomfortably high-

She froze, her breath catching in her throat.

The house droid had indeed gotten it wrong. Lady Vanq wasn't gone. She was right there, lying beneath the blankets in the middle of the bed.

Bink stood motionless, her heart thudding, silently cursing her carelessness as she tried to figure out what to do. If the Devaronian was asleep, there might still be a chance to backtrack and escape.

And then, as Bink's mind began to catch up with her, a fresh shiver ran up her back. Something was very wrong here. The figure in the bed was way too still.

She took a careful breath. "Tav?" she murmured.

"What is it?"

"Hang on." Steeling herself, she headed toward the bed. The figure still didn't move, and as Bink drew closer she realized with a sinking feeling that she couldn't see any rise and fall of blankets across the figure's chest.

Lady Carisica Vanq was dead.

Bink took another careful breath. This time she caught a hint of a spicy-sweet aroma. "Tavia?"

"Bink, what's wrong?" Tavia's anxious voice came back. "If you need to get out-"

"There's no hurry," Bink said, the words aching through a suddenly burning throat. "She's dead."

"Who's dead?"

"The lady of the house." A ripple of half-hysterical laughter bubbled through the acid taste in Bink's mouth. Sternly, she choked it back down. "The droid said she was on a long journey. I guess he was right, after all."

"I don't understand," Tavia said, her voice starting to shake. "You mean she died of-I don't even know what kind of diseases Devaronians can die quickly of."

"In this case, the same thing a lot of other people in the Empire die from these days," Bink said, gingerly lifting the edge of the blanket from the body. One look was all she needed. "She was shot."

"She-what?"

"Single blaster bolt to the upper torso," Bink said. "Close range."

There was a muffled gasp from the comlink clip. "Bink, get out of there. Get out of there now."

"There's no hurry," Bink said, gently laying the blanket back and looking around. "From the smell of bio-suppressant around the body, I'm guessing she's been dead for a while. Several days at least."

"Or maybe two weeks?"

An eerie feeling seemed to flow across the room with the wind drifting through the open window. Was Tavia suggesting what Bink thought she was suggesting? "Stay with me," she said, heading toward the massive door at the far side. "I'm going to check out the safe."

Tavia hissed out a breath. "Be careful."

Safes of this class usually took ten to fifteen minutes to crack. This one took less than two. Clearly, someone had already made it through the barriers. "I'm in," she murmured as she pulled the door open and stepped inside.

"And?"

Bink played her glow rod around the room. The late Lady Vanq's collection was even more eclectic than Jydor's, with art objects ranging from fist-sized flutterines to Wookiee-sized flat sculptures, their vintages stretching from the days of the ancient Rakatan Empire all the way up to modern oddments with no intrinsic value that Bink could see. Off to one side was an empty display pedestal.

The Devaronian's Tchine was gone.

"You're right," Bink said. "Jydor's second Tchine must be Lady Vanq's-"

Behind her, the bedroom door opened.

Bink froze, her head half turned toward the doorway. It was a cleaning droid, running a vacuum attachment across the threshold to the hallway and a meter or so inside the room. It finished its job, and its head rose and swiveled slowly around. Bink tensed:

The mechanical eyes passed the open safe door without any reaction that Bink could detect. Its gaze likewise swept without pause across the dead body in the bed. Backing out of the room, it closed the door behind it.

Bink took a careful breath. "Still there?" she murmured.

"Of course," Tavia said. "What's happening?"

"Oh, it's pretty much bad news all around," Bink said. She stepped out of the safe and closed the door behind her. "Any idea when the players' next break is?"

"Actually, they're finished," Tavia said. "I don't suppose it matters now, but Lando and Zerba both won their tracks."

"No, it probably doesn't," Bink agreed, sitting down on the windowsill and reattaching her harness to the syntherope. "Go find them and get them to our room. We all need to have a serious conversation."

Zerba's eyes widened, the top part of his lacquered hair undulating like a small animal as the hidden antenepalps beneath it twitched. "She's dead?"

"Take it easy," Lando said, keeping his voice and face under rigid control. So neither of Jydor's Tchines was fake; and one of them was in his possession because of theft and murder. The fake-Tchine thing had been bad enough, throwing an unpleasant pall over the whole tournament. With this new revelation, the situation had risen to an entirely new level of nastiness. "This is no time to panic."

"Do be good enough to let me know when that moment comes," Zerba retorted acidly. "Are you insane?"

"Lando's right," Bink said firmly. "Yes, it's bad. But it could be a whole lot worse."

"Bink, you were seen in there," Zerba bit out. "Seen and recorded in a droid memory. The fact that you saw the body and didn't immediately report it automatically makes you an accessory after the fact." He snorted. "In fact, given that we all now know about it, we're all accessories after the fact."

"Two points," Bink said. "First of all, Danteel law on these things allows for reporting delays based on certain mitigating factors."

"Such as?"

"Such as it's acceptable to hold off if you think that reporting it will put your life in danger."

Lando grimaced. "With Jydor involved, that's a pretty safe bet."

"And second," Bink continued, "I'm pretty sure I wasn't seen. Not really."

"You said the droid looked right at you," Zerba reminded her.

"It looked, but it didn't see," Bink said. "The fact that none of the droids has apparently even noticed their mistress is dead implies that someone's fiddled with the house's overall programming matrix. They're not being allowed to see anyone inside the house, alive or dead."

Zerba snorted. "Call me stupid," he said. "But this makes no sense at all."

"It does if you're a thief and murderer," Lando pointed out.

"I meant it makes no sense from Jydor's point of view," Zerba said. "Why in the galaxy would you kill someone for something as easily traced as a Tchine?"

"Why not?" Lando countered. "There are plenty of collectors who keep their prizes hidden away for their own private viewing. A lot of them probably wouldn't much care if an item or two in their vault happened to have been stolen from someone else."

"Or it might have been the other classic motive for murder," Bink said. "Tavia's been digging into Jydor's money deals, and it looks like Lady Vanq suckered him out of a big contract and a lot of money a few months ago."

"How much money?" Lando asked.

"It's rumored to be in the neighborhood of fifty to sixty million credits," Tavia said.

"Which is the same amount he's just made back by selling those first six tournament seats," Bink added. "Takes a creative man to combine revenge and profit into the same murder."

"But it's stolen," Zerba persisted. "Sooner or later, someone's going to notice that Lady Vanq is dead and that her Tchine is missing. The minute they find that Jydor still has one, it'll be obvious what happened."

"Except that there's a cute little glitch in Danteel law," Bink said. "Possession of stolen property is a major crime on Danteel. But the Tchines are identical. Once Jydor's gotten rid of one of them, unless the police can figure out which is which, they can't touch him for that."

"But they'll know he had both of them at one point."

"But they won't have any proof that he was the one who stole it," Bink said. "Without that, and without proof that the one in his display room is the hot one, they'll have no grounds to dig any deeper." She shrugged. "Like I said, it's a glitch."

Zerba shook his head. "Ridiculous. Who else could have stolen it?"

Bink's lip twitched. "Yes, well, that's the other problem," she said reluctantly. "Aside from bringing in enough credits to make up his loss, this tournament has the side benefit of attracting a whole bunch of thieves to Danteel City. Which means that when the balloon goes up, there will be a lot of people Jydor can point fingers at."

Lando winced. "People like you," he said. "And since you've actually been in Lady Vanq's home..."

"...the finger-pointing will likely start with me," Bink agreed heavily. "Especially since, depending on what the thief did to the matrix programming, I may also have been recorded as having come to the front door yesterday afternoon."

Zerba muttered something under his breath. "That's it, then," he said. "Nice seeing you again-nice meeting you, Lando-and I hope we run into each other under happier circumstances." He started to get up.

"Wait a second," Lando said, grabbing for the Balosar's shoulder and missing. "Didn't you hear her? She's on the hook for this."

"Which is why we need to scatter to the wind," Zerba countered. "What else are we going to do?"

Lando looked at Bink. She was tempted, he could see. Tempted to run, to change her name from whatever she was using today to whatever she'd been planning to use tomorrow, and hope she could hide herself in the shadows of the fringe until Lady Vanq's murder was forgotten. And really, given the state of justice in Palpatine's Empire, it probably would be the smartest move.

And then he looked at Tavia. At her composed but smoldering expression.

Tavia had no intention of letting Jydor get away with this. Unlike most fringers-unlike even Lando himself, on certain days-she hadn't totally given up on right and wrong.

Especially not when her sister was poised to take the fall for murder.

Lando squared his shoulders. A pity, really, that this wasn't one of those certain days. "Fine," he said to Zerba. "Go." Turning to Tavia, he raised his eyebrows. "So how do we nail him?"

Zerba, already two steps toward the door, came to a confused-looking halt. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about nailing Jydor," Lando said. "Tavia?"

"The reprogramming of Lady Vanq's house is the key," Tavia said, her eyes narrowed in thought. "If I can figure out what he did, I might be able to backtrack to the programmer. Then we'd have some proof."

"At which point, we can sic the police on him," Bink said, eyeing her sister. She was still not sure running wouldn't be the best option, Lando decided. "If he's smart, he'll make a deal that fingers his boss."

"It's a start," Lando said. "What do you need?"

"Right now, I mostly need time," Tavia said. "If Bink's right about the droids, we should be able to get back into the house without trouble. But it'll take time for me to slice into the system."

"Too bad Rachele Ree isn't here," Bink murmured. "She could slice it in nothing flat."

"Well, she's not," Tavia said, a little crossly. "We'll just need to figure out a way to stall the tournament."

"We could call in a bomb threat," Bink suggested. "Plenty of people don't like Jydor. Or we could finger the Rebellion-that would stir up every Imperial in the hemisphere."

"Don't be ridiculous," Zerba growled, coming back to his chair and sitting down. "The way to stall a game is to make sure no one wins for a while."

Lando eyed him. "You mean throw our hands?"

"Or cheat a little on behalf of whoever's losing." Zerba gave a theatrical sigh. "And since I doubt you can cheat worth anything-no offense-I guess that'll be my job."

Bink reached over and laid a hand on the Balosar's forearm. "Thanks, Zerba," she said quietly.

"Yeah, yeah, you're welcome," Zerba said sourly. "The main game starts at five tomorrow evening. I don't suppose there's any chance you'll be in by then?"

Tavia shook her head. "I first need to find a datapad with the right programming hardwired into it."

"I know a couple of places to look," Bink said. "But it'll probably take most of tomorrow, and I don't want to risk going back to the house until it's dark. That'll be about an hour after you start."

"Can you stall the game that long?" Tavia asked.

"No problem," Zerba assured her.

"In fact, given the caliber of the players we've got, it'll probably drag out at least six hours without any finagling at all on our part," Lando added. "Sounds like we've got a plan."

"Right," Zerba muttered. "Lucky, lucky us."

The players assembled at the table precisely at five, after Jydor had once again made his grand entrance and placed the Tchine in the center of the table. After looking at it for two days from across the ballroom, Lando decided the thing didn't look all that impressive close up.

Maybe it was because he couldn't look at it anymore without seeing a sheen of blood on it. Or maybe it was because the double ring of Jydor's guards now encircled him as well as the figurine.

Still, at least all the guards were facing away from him. That was worth something.

Jydor gave the standard best-of-luck speech that tournament hosts always made, resumed his seat in the game judge chair, and the game began.

As Lando had already noted, the assembled players were some of the best in the galaxy. Most of the main six were far better than he was, and they certainly knew it. More than once he caught a side look from one of them directed at him or Zerba that clearly carried the unspoken question of what such rank amateurs were doing in their company. It was just as well, he thought, that he was no longer trying to win.

But all the rest of them were, and the play was every bit as cutthroat as he'd expected. It was going back and forth so much, in fact, that they were two hours into the game before he noticed something odd.

One of the players, a craggy-faced Rodian named Mensant, had settled into a pattern of winning every few hands. Every eight hands, in fact, plus a handful of others.

The logical suspicion was that the guy was cheating. The problem was that he wasn't winning the hands he himself was dealing. Instead, it was the hands being dealt by a blank-eyed man named Phramp.

Lando gave it another dozen rounds, just to be sure. Then, during one of the deals, he casually looked over at Zerba and gave a microscopic nod toward Phramp.

Zerba's lip twitched, and he gave an equally small nod in response. So he'd caught it, too.

An hour later, Jydor called for a break. Heading toward the bar, carefully avoiding getting anywhere near Zerba, Lando pulled out his comlink and keyed for Bink. "We need a conference," he said when she answered. "Can you add in Zerba?"

"Sure." There was a short pause. "Yes?" came Zerba's voice.

"What do you think?" Lando asked.

"I was wondering why Jydor had set it up so that the players took turns dealing instead of having one of his own people do it," Zerba said. "Looks to me like he's got Phramp trying to throw the game to Mensant."

"He's throwing the game?" Bink echoed. "What in chaos for?"

"I don't know," Lando said. "Before you told us about Lady Vanq I would have said Mensant and Phramp were working for Jydor and that he was trying to scam the Tchine back into his collection."

"But now it looks more like he's trying to unload the stolen one onto someone in particular," Zerba said.

"Let's see if we can find out who Mensant is fronting for," Bink said. "I'll see if Tavia can track that down after she finishes the coding search."

"Good," Lando said. "How's that going?"

"Slow," Bink said. "But she's making progress." There was an indistinct voice in the background. "She says it's creepy in here."

"You're in the bedroom?" Zerba asked.

"It's the only place we're absolutely sure the droids can't see anyone," Bink pointed out. "Talk to you later."

She clicked off. Grimacing to himself, Lando put away his comlink-

"Excuse me," a voice behind him said.

Before Lando could even start to turn, a large man appeared beside him. "Master Chumu's compliments," the man continued. "He'd like a word with you."

"And Master Chumu is...," Lando prompted, edging away.

"Master Jydor's business manager," the man said, staying right with him.

"Maybe later," Lando said. "I've got a game to get back to."

"I'm afraid I have to insist," the man said. "Don't worry about the game-it won't resume for at least twenty minutes."

"How do you know?"

"Because Master Jydor's gone to the private dining room for a snack," the man said. "He always has crab rotoven, and it always takes him twenty to thirty minutes to eat it."

Lando frowned. "And how do you know that?"

"Because I'm one of his household guards," the man said tightly. "Call me Rovi." He gestured in the direction of the private turbolifts. "And I really must insist."

"Did you see where he took him?" Bink asked, gripping her comlink tightly.

"Straight to one of Jydor's private turbolifts," Zerba said, his voice strained. "And the guards there obviously knew the guy."

"They probably play cards together after hours," Bink said, staring at the body lying on the bed. She'd known this charade couldn't last. But she hadn't expected it to fall apart this fast. "But you're still free?"

"Free and clear, as far as I can tell."

"Then it must have been something he said that was overheard," she concluded, trying to remember Lando's exact words. He'd said Lady Vanq's name, she remembered. That might have been all it took, especially if that particular guard knew the old Devaronian had been murdered.

Even if they didn't know the details, Jydor certainly did. Lando was in it, all right, all the way up to his neck.

Unless Bink could manufacture another interpretation for his comment:

"Okay," she said, crossing over to Lady Vanq's safe. "I'll handle this. Stay put and pretend you don't know anything. That means rejoining the game if and when it starts up again."

"I know what it means," Zerba growled. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Me, too," Bink said. "Let me know if anything interesting happens."

"What are we going to do?" Tavia asked tightly.

"You're going to keep on the programming patch," Bink said, setting to work opening the safe. "Where are you right now?"

"I've got the patch itself figured out," Tavia said. "But I haven't been able to backtrack it yet. There's something funny in one section of the coding, too."

"What kind of funny?"

"The confusing kind," Tavia said. "It reads like encrypted text. I'm trying to clear it so I can see if it's something we should be worried about."

"But you could cut out the patch and let the droids see what's happened in here?"

"Anytime you want," Tavia confirmed. "I'd like to decrypt that text first, though."

"Go ahead and give it a shot," Bink said. "But if we run out of time, we'll just have to pop the patch and hope the text isn't a problem."

The safe lock snicked open. Pulling on the door with one hand, she keyed Lando's comlink with the other. "Here goes nothing."

Darim Chumu was a middle-aged human with the look and feel of a born huckster. From his casual body language as he sat comfortably in one of the chairs in the penthouse entryway lounge, to the deep smile lines in his face, it was clear that he was a man who'd closed countless deals over the years.

But that face wasn't smiling now. And the languid posture carried the same underlying tension of a gambler trying to read an opponent's hand. "I

apologize for the abruptness of my invitation," he said after the somewhat strained introductions had been made and Lando had been seated across from him. "But you mentioned Lady Vanq, and that name is not to be spoken casually in the High Card Casino."

"I'll make a note," Lando said, striving to match his host's tone. "Was there anything else?"

Chumu's eyes narrowed microscopically. "I don't think you fully understand, Master Calrissian," he said. "Lady Vanq cheated Master Jydor out of a great deal of money a few months ago. Friends of hers aren't welcome here."

"I'm hardly a friend," Lando protested mildly. So Chumu was probing to see just how close Lando and the murdered Devaronian had been. "More a business acquaintance."

"I didn't know she did business with gamblers," Chumu said. "Do you own a casino or gambling pit?"

"Actually, it was regarding one of my other professions," Lando said. "It's rather confidential, I'm afraid."

Chumu's eyes narrowed a little more. "I'm afraid I must insist on an answer."

"I don't know if I can-" Lando broke off as his comlink twittered.

"Go ahead and answer that," Chumu said.

"They'll call back," Lando said, leaving the comlink where it was. Odds were that it was Zerba calling to chat, and cheating, scams, and murder were the absolute last topics of conversation he wanted brought up right now.

"Answer it," Chumu said, his tone making it clear it was an order. "Or Rovi will."

With a grimace, Lando pulled out the comlink. As he did so, Rovi reached over his shoulder and closed a massive hand around Lando's. "On wide-focus, if you please," Chumu added.

There was nothing for it but to comply. Mentally crossing his fingers, Lando clicked it on. "Lando."

"It's Michelle," Bink's voice came. "Listen, do you know where Lady Vanq is? I've tried all the comlink numbers I have, but I can't get ahold of her."

"I don't have any numbers you don't," Lando said, trying to hide his relief. Bink calling-and using a pseudonym-meant that she was on to the problem. Probably Zerba had spotted the grab and alerted her.

Of course, he had no idea where she was going with this. But whatever it was, it would probably beat anything he could come up with on the fly. "Is it important?"

"Of course it's important," Bink said stiffly. "She still owes me the last payment on that Tchine copy."

And with that, Lando was suddenly up to speed. "She hasn't paid yet?" he asked, feigning surprise.

"And she's late on the initial for the Caffreni flutterine," Bink said. "You told me she could be trusted to pay on time."

"That's her reputation," Lando agreed. "I'll see if I can get hold of her."

"You do that," Bink said. "When you do, tell her the Jam'arn circlet's also done. That one I'm not so worried about-it was a lot easier than the others. Don't tell her that, of course."

"I won't," Lando promised. "I'll get back to you."

He clicked off. "I suppose there's no point in being coy now," he said to Chumu. "I also act as intermediary on small art jobs."

"You mean forgeries?" Chumu growled.

"They're not forgeries," Lando countered. "Forgery implies intent to deceive, and there's no such intent here. Collectors are well within their rights to have decoys fabricated to throw off potential thieves."

"Perhaps," Chumu said. His expression was still under control, Lando noted, but his face seemed a couple of shades whiter than it had been.

Small wonder. He clearly was in this with Jydor, and was now facing the horrible possibility that they might have committed murder for nothing more valuable than a high-quality forgery.

"Trust me," Lando said. "I always check out the legal issues before I accept a job of this sort."

"I'll take your word for it," Chumu said. "Interesting you should happen to pop up here. Master Jydor was just wondering a few days ago whether we should do something similar for a few of the pieces in his own collection. But he was never convinced that anyone could make copies good enough to fool a knowledgeable thief."

"Michelle can," Lando said. "I've brokered quite a few of these deals, and I've never seen anyone better than she is."

"I'd like to meet her," Chumu said. "Do you think she'd be willing to drop by?"

"I'm sure I could set something up," Lando said. "Right now, though, I have a game I need to get back to."

"Of course," Chumu said. "Just call and set up a meeting, will you? Then Rovi will take you back down."

Lando sighed. "Fine," he said, pulling out his comlink again.

"And ask her to bring samples of her work," Chumu added. "I'd like to see them."

Bink finished her conversation and clicked off. "I'm in," she announced. "Any progress on that text?"

"Not yet," Tavia said, frowning at her datapad. "How much time do I have?"

"I can stall him for at least a day," Bink said. "That should give you plenty of time." Her eyes flicked to the body in the bed. "That is, if you don't mind staying here overnight."

"I'm not staying any longer than you do," Tavia declared with a shiver. "I've got a recording. I can work on it from our room."

"Good enough," Bink said. She wrapped the Caffreni and Jam'arn carefully and slipped them into her hip pouch. Just borrowing them, she thought with a twinge of guilt toward the dead Devaronian. "Grab your gear, and let's go."

Chumu was impressed by Bink. He was even more impressed by the Caffreni and Jam'arn she'd brought. "These are really forgeries?" he asked, peering closely at each of them in turn.

"They're copies," Bink corrected. "Forgery implies intent to deceive. A copy is intended only for whatever legal purpose the owner wishes to put it to."

"You sound like your friend Calrissian."

"He's a colleague, not a friend," Bink again corrected.

"My mistake."

Casually, Bink looked around. Chumu had brought her deeper into the penthouse than Lando had been, right into the main conversation room. Presumably because there was more privacy here, along with more comfortable chairs.

The view was certainly better. Directly behind Chumu was the massive but artistically decorated door to Jydor's art display room. "Let's cut to the core," she said. "What do you want copied?"

"Not so fast," Chumu admonished. "I'm still not convinced your copies can stand up to a sensor scan. How close a match is one of these to the real thing?"

Bink suppressed a smile. "It'll pass any test a normal thief could run on it," she said. "You'd need a special sensor array to tell the difference."

"How special?"

"Special enough that I doubt there's anyone in the sector except me who knows how to put one together."

"Interesting," Chumu murmured. "I'd like to see one."

Bink cocked her head. "Why?"

Chumu's lip twisted. "There were some rumors going around at the time Master Jydor bought his Tchine figurine," he said with just the right mix of reluctance and embarrassment. "Hints that the statue might be a forgery. Naturally, we had it checked out, and it came through clean." He set the other two art objects onto the conversation room's low center table. "But at the time we had no idea that a special sensor was needed."

"Hold on," Bink said, frowning. "You're saying the big prize on display downstairs might be a fake?"

"I think the likelihood of that is extremely small," Chumu assured her hastily. "But if there's even a chance that it is, we need to know about it before the tournament ends."

"Oh, absolutely," Bink agreed, peering thoughtfully off into space. "I can certainly put a sensor together and take a look. Unfortunately, I can't do so until tomorrow."

"Not tonight?"

"There are some special components I need to get," Bink smiled faintly. "Components I can't simply carry around with me, for various legal reasons. You may also need time to collect the necessary money."

"What money?"

"My money," Bink said. "The fee for the test will be ten thousand."

Chumu didn't even bat an eye. "That will be satisfactory," he said. Standing up, he pulled out a data card. "Here's my contact information," he said, handing it to her. "Call me when you're ready."

"I will." Tucking the data card away, Bink returned the two art objects to her bag. "I'll see you tomorrow. Have my fee ready."

As best as Lando could tell, Phramp was the only player at the table doing any serious cheating, and he was still cheating toward Mensant.

Or at least he was the only one until Zerba got going.

Lando had seen plenty of cheating over his years at the gaming tables. He'd seen it done well and badly, adroitly and so incompetently that he wondered how the perpetrator avoided getting blasted on the spot.

Zerba was an artist.

His eyes never betrayed his moves. His hands never fumbled or twitched. His tells, which Lando suspected had been carefully designed to give the other players the illusion that they knew everything they needed to about him, never wavered.

And slowly, Mensant's steady climb toward victory began to falter.

Zerba didn't throw the hands to himself or Lando, of course. That would have been too obvious, not to mention dangerous. Instead, he threw his deals to the other players around the table, never falling into a pattern, chipping away methodically at Mensant's lead.

Naturally, Mensant himself didn't seem bothered. He was a professional gambler, well accustomed to the ebbs and flows of fortune.

Far more interesting was Phramp's reaction.

It came gradually, as gradually as the reversal of fortune itself. But Lando could see his change from confusion to suspicion to certainty as he realized someone else at the table was playing his game straight back at him.

Only he wasn't quite as good at spotting cheaters as he was at being one. Lando watched in dark amusement as Phramp's eyes darted back and forth around the table, trying to tag his unknown opponent. But as far as Lando could tell he never completely narrowed it down.

Of course, the task was made harder by the fact that Zerba wasn't operating alone. Lando didn't dare risk any actual cheating, not with this crowd, certainly not with the cam droids hovering at the ceiling showing the hand-by-hand

action to the spectators spread out around the ballroom. But that didn't mean he couldn't judiciously throw a hand whenever it would help one of Mensant's rivals.

And as the game progressed through the late-night hours into those of early morning, he wondered what Jydor was going to say when Phramp warned him that someone was messing with his plan.

What he would say, and what he would do.

"The game's certainly getting interesting," Bink reported, her tone giving Tavia a quick mental image of her sister's smugly satisfied expression. "Hard to tell from back here, but it looks like Phramp's about to burst a blood vessel."

"That's nice," Tavia said mechanically, only a fraction of her attention on Bink's running commentary. She almost had the encryption solved now. The right nudge, in the right direction, and it should shatter, leaving the mysterious text clear and open.

She took a deep breath, feeling a surge of satisfaction. This kind of computer slicing wasn't really her forte-her strengths ran more to the hardware side of the electronics spectrum. To have gotten this far this quickly was highly gratifying.

Of course, the person who'd created the patch didn't seem to be all that skilled at such things, either. But that was okay. An achievement was an achievement, and there was no point in muddying it up with ifs, ands, buts, and qualifiers. She gave it one final tweak-

And the encryption was gone. Smiling, Tavia ran her eyes down the mysterious text.

Her smile faded, the glow of satisfaction vanished into something cold and unpleasant. She read the note three times, her sense of bewilderment growing deeper with each pass.

Distantly, she became aware that Bink was still chattering cheerfully. Reading through the text one final time, she groped for the comlink. "Bink?"

"What's wrong?" Bink asked, all levity gone from her voice. She knew Tavia's verbal cues as intimately as Tavia knew hers.

"Something very strange," Tavia said. "And very wrong."

"I'm on my way," Bink said. "Looks like the boys will be going on for a while. Do you need them, too?"

"There's no rush," Tavia said. "Actually, the longer they're in the game, the longer we'll have to figure out what's going on. And I'm thinking we're going to need every bit of that time."

"No," Zerba said firmly, his eyes narrowed, his hair again doing that rippling thing Lando had noticed once before. "I don't buy it."

"It's right there," Bink said, gesturing toward Tavia's datapad.

"But it's ridiculous," Zerba said. "Who leaves a murder note?"

"Lady Vanq, apparently," Lando murmured, his eyes tracking down the text:

"...To the Danteel City police authorities:

If I am found dead by violence, be advised that my killer is Master Veilred Jydor. He has been a business rival for many years, and currently holds me responsible for his failed bid for the Lockyern account. He is a violent and vindictive human, and I have no doubt that he will soon make a deadly move against me for pride's sake.

I have arranged for this note to be transmitted upon news of my death. I beg from the dark beyond that you will bring justice to my fate.

Lady Carisica Vanq, Danteel City, Danteel."

"It can't be legit," Zerba insisted. "The only way it could work is if the programming patch was in place before the murder, and Lady Vanq somehow managed to intertwine a message into it, and that she did it while dying of a massive blaster burn."

"And that it didn't occur to her to simply call the police directly instead of doing all that," Lando added.

"Exactly," Zerba said, nodding. "That sort of thing only happens in badly written mystery holodramas."

"Agreed," Bink said. "And you're right about the patch having been created before the murder-otherwise, the droids would have seen the killer come in. As you also said, the message had to have been intertwined at the same time." She seemed to brace herself. "And since the message implicates Jydor, that means he's not the murderer."

Lando looked at Tavia. She'd always been the less talkative of the pair, though she was perfectly capable of relaxing and having fun if the circumstances and company were right. But at the moment her usual reserve had descended into something dark and brooding. "If not Jydor, then who?" he asked. "Tavia?"

Reluctantly, she raised her eyes from her contemplation of the floor. "There's only one person that makes sense," she said. "Jydor's business manager, Chumu."

"Chumu?" Zerba echoed, his eyes widening briefly. "No-that's ridiculous. He's a businessman. An accountant and deal maker. They're not the murdering type."

"That guard, Rovi, is probably in it with him," Bink pointed out. "From what I saw, he could definitely be the murdering type."

"But-" Zerba began.

"Look at the facts," Bink interrupted. "Or rather, look at the situation if this all goes down the way it looks like it was supposed to. Lady Vanq, a serious business rival, is now gone. Her supposed warning note will be enough to launch an investigation, and under Danteel law Jydor will be barred from running his business until the probe is complete. That leaves Chumu in charge."

"There's more," Tavia said. "I've done a correlation analysis with HoloNet communications and credit transfers, and I'm pretty sure Mensant is playing the tournament on behalf of another of Jydor's business rivals, a Twi'lek named Arvakke. If Phramp can throw a charge of cheating against Mensant,

and make it stick, that'll wash up against Arvakke under Danteel's agent-principal felony linkage laws."

"Meaning that Arvakke won't be able to run his business, either, until the charges are cleared up," Bink said. "With two major rivals out of the way-three if you count Jydor himself-Chumu is in the perfect position to move in and take over."

Zerba gave a little snort. "Winner take all, just like Jydor said."

"Except it's not the winner he had in mind," Bink agreed tightly. "The question is what we do about it."

Zerba shrugged. "I'm still good with running, especially if Chumu's targeting Jydor. With a fish that big on the hook, he's not going to bother hunting minnows."

"Only if the big fish stays on the hook," Tavia said. "If he wiggles free, I don't doubt Chumu would go back to pointing fingers in the most convenient direction."

"That direction being toward Bink?" Lando asked.

"Exactly," Bink said. "With the bio-suppressant masking the decay profiles and time-of-death readings, the cops won't know whether she died two weeks ago or yesterday until they do a complete layer-autopsy. There's no way Jydor or I or anyone else will be able to come up with an alibi for that long a window."

"And the whole thing will be triggered by the supposed murder note," Lando said. "I assume the encryption vanishes when the programming patch is taken off?"

"Basically," Tavia said. "And it doesn't just sit in her computer system, either. Like the note said, it's set to be transmitted straight to the police."

"So Bink's only way out is for us to prove that Chumu did it?"

"Basically," Bink said, eyeing him closely. "You have an idea?"

"I think so," Lando said. "Tavia, can you get into the text of that note? I mean far enough to change it and then put the encryption back on without that being obvious?"

"Probably," Tavia said. "But not from here. This is just a copy-I'd have to get back into Lady Vanq's house to do that."

"Good," Lando said. "One more question: can you also get into the casino's computer system?"

"How deep in do you need?"

"Not very," Lando assured her. "I just need access to low-level functions. Housekeeping, environmental functions-that sort of thing."

"She'll need a tap," Bink said. "But I can pop one in anytime and have it ready whenever she needs it."

"Good." Lando looked at Zerba. "Winner take all, you said? I think it's time we realigned Chumu's way of thinking."

The next evening's session was well under way when Bink arrived at Jydor's private turbolift and announced she was there to see Master Chumu. There was a short comlink conference, after which the guard allowed her passage.

Not surprisingly, Chumu was waiting when the turbolift doors opened. Also not surprisingly, he didn't look happy to see her. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"You said you wanted me to check out the Tchine downstairs," Bink reminded him.

"The operative word being downstairs," he retorted. "I don't need you up here."

"You do if you want your readings," Bink said, slipping past him and heading for the lounge outside the art display room where the two of them had held their meeting the previous day.

"Wait a minute," Chumu said, hurrying to catch up. "Where are you going?"

"I can't exactly wander the streets with an illegal sensor," Bink said over her shoulder. "I have to assemble it, and for that I need privacy." She reached the lounge and sat down in the chair directly in front of the security holocam.

"You might be more comfortable at the kitchen counter," Chumu said, dithering uncertainly in the doorway as she opened her bag and started laying out the collection of electronic components she and Tavia had thrown together. "There's more space and considerably more privacy."

"This is fine," Bink assured him. "If you really want privacy, you can shut off that holocam behind me. Or feel free to leave it on-I'm sure you'll be able to explain my presence somehow."

Chumu threw a hooded look at the holocam. "You're here to take some acoustical readings for a possible new entertainment system," he said. "There's no sound on that holocam, so you don't have to worry about what we say."

"Fine," Bink said. "Incidentally, you're welcome to watch. But I promise you won't see anything."

For a moment she continued laying out her gear in silence. Chumu looked at the security holocam again, then crossed reluctantly to one of the other chairs around the table. Pulling out a datapad, he settled down to read.

Bink finished laying out the components. As she started putting them together, she surreptitiously checked her chrono. Her timing, as usual, was perfect.

Any minute now...

Theoretically, Tavia knew, the maid outfit Bink had worn a couple of days ago should fit her just as well as it had her sister. But where Bink had worn it with casual ease, Tavia could feel the clothing pressing against her torso and arms, the effect hovering on the edge of claustrophobia. The stack of towels she'd collected from their room as camouflage felt as heavy as an Imperial cruiser balanced across her forearms. The plush carpet and carved ceiling and walls of the ninety-ninth-floor hallway seemed to stare accusingly at the intruder even as they echoed her heartbeat back at her.

She hated this. She really, truly hated this.

"You! Stop!"

Tavia's breath froze in her lungs, her muscles fortunately stiffening instead of betraying her by jerking with obvious guilt. Sternly ordering her body to behave, reminding herself that by all appearances it was perfectly reasonable for her to be here, she turned around. "Yes?" she asked diffidently.

An elegantly dressed Togruta was striding down the hallway toward her, his striped upper horns gleaming as if freshly polished, the dark eyes in the red-and-gray-patterned face staring at and through her.

"Yes?" Tavia repeated, this time hearing a slight shaking in her voice.

The Togruta reached her and, without a word, plucked the top towel off the stack in her arms, then turned and walked away.

For a moment Tavia watched as he headed back to his room, her heart slowly calming down. He could have just asked. He should have just asked.

But she was simply a maid, a human doing a droid's work, here for no better reason than that Jydor thought living servants made for a more elegant background than mechanical ones. Why shouldn't one of the guests treat her as if she were nothing?

She turned back around and continued on her way. She really, truly, passionately hated this.

But it was Bink's life on the line. What else could she do?

The suite Bink had specified was, thankfully, unoccupied. Locking the door behind her, Tavia crossed to the window and set down her small pile of towels on a nearby chair. She pulled out Bink's ghost-burglar sensor and the rest of the equipment that had been hidden in the middle of the stack, and set to work.

Her first task was to find and neutralize whatever alarms had been set up on the windows. Fortunately, there was only one, which the sensor quickly spotted. Bink, Tavia knew, could probably have disarmed it in five seconds or less. It took Tavia two nerve-racking minutes.

Most hotels in Danteel City employed the standard opaquing window glass common throughout the galaxy. But true luxury places still used curtains or drapes, especially in their finest suites, and Jydor was clearly determined that his ninety-ninth floor be as elegant as the best of them. The window had two sets of curtains: one set gauzy, with a half-twist weave that turned stars and city lights into individual spinning galaxies, the other set a much heavier and more luxurious material that would block the morning sunlight from late sleepers.

The gauzy ones would be faster and easier to work with, she decided. Pulling down one of them and its support rods, she arranged the curtain and rods in a square on the floor. Two minutes later, she had the curtain stretched across the rods like a wind sail, all of it glued solidly together with dabs of rock putty. She fastened two more curtain rods to the far end of the square, angling them back and upward.

Now came the tricky part. Opening the window, she eased the net outside, setting it horizontally just beneath the window and gluing the near end to the wall. Two more daubs of putty on the ends of the support struts, likewise anchoring them to the wall, and it was ready.

For a moment she gazed out at her handiwork. Bink had assured her this would work, and Bink was almost always right about these things. Tavia could only hope she was right about this one, too.

She checked her chrono. Any minute now...

It started subtly, with Zerba muttering under his breath as he gazed hard at the Tchine sitting in its display pyramid in the center of the table. But it didn't stay subtle for long. Gradually, his volume increased until the whole table could hear him.

"I'm telling you, there's something wrong with it," the Balosar insisted. "I saw another Tchine up close once. There's just something wrong with this one."

Lando looked around the table. The current dealer-Mensant, as it happened-was still shuffling, either oblivious to Zerba's monologue or simply ignoring it. The other players, though, were paying attention, and some of them were now also staring hard at the figurine.

Time for Lando to put in his half credit's worth. "It's probably some kind of optical illusion," he told Zerba. "I saw one once, too, and I agree it looks odd. It's probably just some kind of reflection off the transparisteel."

"Maybe," Zerba said darkly. He half turned into his seat and gestured to Jydor. "How about letting us see it without its fancy dress?"

"I think not," Jydor said, his tone polite but with an edge to it. "I owe it to the eventual victor to keep his prize safe."

"Besides, I'm sure he has a certificate of authenticity," Lando said. "He would hardly have bought it without one."

"Maybe he could show that to us," Zerba suggested, still gazing suspiciously at Jydor.

"I'm sure Master Jydor is trustworthy," Lando said. "As I said before--"

"A trick of the light," Zerba growled. "Yes, we all heard you. I'd still like to see the certificate."

Across the table, Phramp cleared his throat. "With all due respect, Master Jydor, it wouldn't take long, and we're about due for a break anyway."

Jydor hesitated, then gave a reluctant nod. "If it'll put an end to this nonsense, fine," he said. He pulled out his comlink.

Right on schedule, Chumu stirred and pulled out his comlink. "Yes?"

There was a moment of silence as the person at the other end spoke. Watching out of the corner of her eye, Bink saw Chumu's lip twitch. "Yes, of course," he said. "I'll bring it down immediately."

He clicked off and stood up. "I have to go downstairs for a minute," he said, crossing the lounge in the direction of Jydor's private office.

"Take your time," Bink said, not raising her head from her work. "I'd just as soon not have an audience anyway."

Chumu reached the door and hesitated, and she saw his eyes again flick up to the security holocam. The reminder that she was under constant surveillance seemed to calm him a little. "There's a guard in the next room over," he added. He was trying to project a gruff forcefulness, but Bink could hear the tension and nervousness beneath the words. Clearly, he wasn't happy with all these changes that were interfering with his neat little frame-up. "If you need anything, just call. If he asks, don't forget-"

"I'm taking acoustical readings," Bink cut in. "Yes, I've got it."

Chumu hesitated another second, then finally left, closing the door behind him.

Bink gave him thirty seconds more, just to make sure he wouldn't pop back in unexpectedly. Then, making a final minute adjustment to the angle of the projector she'd set up under Chumu's nose, she turned it on.

And with the projector sending the video she and Tavia had created straight into the surveillance holocam, whatever guard or droid was watching the feed would see nothing except her working industriously at the table.

For the next two minutes, she was invisible.

She'd been able to read the vault door's coding sequence during her earlier soft probe through the display room floor, but there was always the chance that Jydor might have changed it during the past couple of days. But luck was with her. She punched in the sequence, and the door popped. Pulling it open just far enough to slip through, she headed inside.

The Tchine was right where she'd last seen it, hidden away in the corner of the room. She pulled off the cloth covering it, grabbed another similar-sized object, and put it in the Tchine's place with the cloth again draped over it. Then, with her prize in hand, she slipped back out to the lounge. She closed and sealed the door, and headed over to the line of windows.

Hopefully, Tavia was ready. Even more hopefully, she'd gotten the correct room and the correct window.

Bink opened the ventilation aperture at the top of the window, maneuvered the Tchine through the narrow gap, and let it fall.

When it finally happened, it came almost as an anticlimax. One minute the net was empty, the curtain material fluttering in the wind flowing across the city. The next minute there was a muffled thud, and a priceless art object lay within Tavia's reach, bobbing gently in the breeze.

Three minutes later, with the curtains and rods back in place and the window alarm reset, she walked back through the door and the relative safety of the hallway, the Tchine concealed inside her stack of towels. On one level, she always expected Bink's plans to work. On another level, she was always terrified they would fail.

So far, this one seemed to be working.

So far.

Bink gave her sister five minutes to complete her part of the operation, then another three just to be sure. Then, putting three final pieces into the ridiculous-looking device she'd been building, she called for the guard.

"I'm ready to go," she said, stuffing everything back into her bag. "Master Chumu said I should meet him downstairs."

"All right," the guard said, stepping forward and taking a quick look into her pouch. Apparently satisfied that she hadn't somehow teleported the fancy tableware out of the dining room cabinet, he escorted her to the turbolift and gestured her in.

Twice on the trip down she almost called Tavia to see if everything had gone according to the plan. Both times she left her comlink in her belt.

Tavia was good at this, far better than Tavia herself realized. Besides, if you couldn't trust your own sister to come through for you, who could you trust?

Lando took his time examining the Tchine certificate Chumu had brought down from the penthouse. The other players were equally thorough. By the time they finished, nearly fifteen minutes had passed, and Chumu was clearly starting to sweat.

"Satisfied?" Jydor asked as the last player handed back the datapad.

"Absolutely," Phramp said, apparently having decided that he was authorized to speak for the entire table. "Thank you, Master Jydor."

Jydor looked at Zerba. "Satisfied?" he repeated.

"I suppose," Zerba muttered.

"Then I suggest we continue with the game," Jydor said, settling back in his chair and handing the datapad to Chumu. "Take it back upstairs," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," Chumu said. Tucking the datapad under his arm, he climbed down from the double platform, eased between the guards, and headed across the ballroom.

Lando watched him go, then turned back to the table. Bink had said ten minutes should be enough, and he and Zerba had given her fifteen. They should be good to go.

Mensant finished his fresh shuffle and began dealing the cards. Smoothing out his mustache, Lando prepared his mind for the game.

Tavia had expected Chumu to spot her in the restaurant on his way out of the ballroom. But he apparently wasn't expecting things to have moved this quickly and bypassed the restaurant in favor of heading straight to the private turbolift. Tavia thought about chasing him down, decided it wasn't something Michelle the professional art forger would do, and remained seated at her table. Sipping the nonalcoholic drink she'd ordered, she nurtured her patience.

Three minutes later he was back. This time he spotted her and hurried over.

"There you are," he growled as he dropped into the seat across from her. "What are you doing here?"

"My job," Tavia said, trying for the sardonic-edged professional tone that Bink had said she'd used on the man earlier. "What kept you?"

"What kept-" He broke off, glaring a little harder. "How long have you been down here?"

"Almost as long as you have," Tavia told him.

Which wasn't quite true, of course. In actual fact, she'd arrived at the table barely a minute before he'd left the ballroom, after her quick exchange of clothing and equipment with Bink in the ladies' refresher. "You need to pay better attention to your surroundings," she added.

"Don't be cute," he bit out. "How are you planning to do this?"

"No planning needed," Tavia said. "It's done."

He seemed taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I took the readings." Tavia gestured toward the ballroom. "You were right. It's a copy."

"Wait a minute," he growled. "How could you have taken the readings? I didn't see you in there."

"You weren't supposed to," Tavia said, adding some strained patience to her voice. That one was easy-it was a tone she used with Bink a lot. "Did you hear what I just said? Master Jydor's Tchine is a copy."

Chumu's face stiffened, then seemed to close in on itself as the words finally penetrated. His eyes shifted to her equipment bag, resting on the chair beside her, then to the ballroom entrance, then back to her face. "You're sure?"

"Positive," Tavia said. "It's a very good copy, actually. The artist used the same techniques and materials I do."

Chumu swallowed visibly. "No way to tell who that artist is, I suppose?"

"Not without a closer look." Tavia wiggled her fingers. "You have my ten thousand?"

Chumu looked back into the ballroom. "Yes, of course," he said, pulling a credit tab from his pocket and sliding it across the table to her. "You said you made a similar copy for Lady Vanq?"

"I did," Tavia said sourly. "Though if I don't get paid soon I'll be taking it back."

"Assuming you can even find it."

"Oh, it's probably in her vault with the real one," Tavia said, peering at the credit tab. Ten thousand as agreed, nonencrypted, ready for her to simply take somewhere and deposit or cash. "She was talking about taking it to Devaron with her, and according to the spaceport records her ship's still here," she continued, tucking the credit tab into a pocket. "So what are you going to do about your little tournament problem?"

"That'll be up to Master Jydor," Chumu murmured, his mind clearly elsewhere. "I'll let him know and we'll go from there. Thank you for your assistance. I'll be in touch."

Tavia frowned. "About..."

"About making copies of some of Master Jydor's other artwork."

Tavia felt her stomach tighten. With the end of her masquerade in sight, she'd briefly forgotten that that had been Bink's entry vector into this whole thing.

Luckily, Chumu seemed too preoccupied to notice her slip. "Of course," she said, standing up and looping the strap of her bag over her shoulder. "Good luck."

She headed across the restaurant, her shoulder blades itching with the vivid image of a blaster bolt flashing across the open space and burning between them.

But the shot didn't come. Chumu had apparently bought the story. Now if only he would react the way Bink and Lando hoped.

From that last lingering look he'd sent toward the ballroom, Tavia rather thought he would.

It was late evening when Jydor finally called for a dinner break.

It had been a good few hours, Lando decided as he eased himself out of his chair, wincing as unused muscles were suddenly recalled to duty. Mensant was still ahead of the pack, but his once commanding lead had been whittled down

to nearly nothing. The other players had noticed and were brimming with fresh confidence as they realized it was once again a wide-open game.

Phramp, unsurprisingly, was fit to be tied.

So, apparently, was Chumu, though for entirely different reasons. As Lando and the other players and spectators filed out of the ballroom, he caught a glimpse of the business manager pushing his way upstream against the crowd, making for the platform where Jydor was still sitting, studying something on his datapad.

Pulling out his comlink, Lando keyed for Zerba.

"Yeah, I saw him," the Balosar said after Lando gave him the news. "He's worried, all right."

"The question is whether he's worried enough," Lando said. "You want to watch him, or should I?"

"No need," Tavia's voice cut in. "I've got electrobinoculars and a clear view. You two go get some food. I'll let you know what happens."

Tavia's first report came as Lando was ordering a light meal: Chumu was telling Jydor of rumors that a professional armed robbery team was in the city, and that he was concerned the Tchine might be their target. Jydor seemed unimpressed, but Chumu was pressing his point and urging that the figurine be returned to the safety of the penthouse display room.

Jydor didn't seem inclined to bow to pressure, especially not pressure from a gang of robbers. But Chumu kept at him, and as Jydor headed to his private dining room for his own meal he finally gave in. As Jydor disappeared into the dining room, Chumu collected the Tchine and the guards, and they marched together out of the ballroom and into the turbolift.

Tavia's second report, midway through Lando's meal, was that the guard Rovi had emerged alone from the turbolift, a carrybag looped securely over his shoulder, and was heading for the exit.

"Better warn Bink that company's on the way," Lando said, though he doubted Tavia needed any such nudging.

She didn't. "Already done," she said. "By the time the game resumes, it should all be over."

Lando made a face as he put away his comlink. Their part of it would be over, certainly. But his wouldn't.

Though it could be. Things were far enough along that even if he left right now Chumu's grand scheme would still lie in ruins. Jydor would be in the clear; and while Chumu might not get all the punishment he deserved, Lando had long ago recognized that it wasn't a perfect universe.

He scowled. On the other hand, if he bailed Bink wouldn't be pleased. And Bink not pleased wasn't something he was ready to face right now. Probably not ever.

With a sigh, he turned back to his meal. Not exactly what he'd signed up for when he first arrived on Danteel. But he'd come this far. He might as well see it through.

Tavia, Bink knew, hated the rare situations where she had to impersonate her ghost-thief sister. But even hating it, she still did a good job of it.

Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said in reverse.

"You finished?" Tavia's anxious voice came over Bink's comlink clip.

"Almost," Bink growled, glaring at her datapad and Tavia's supposedly simple, step-by-step instructions on how to break into the encryption. Step-by-step, maybe. Simple, absolutely not.

"You mean you aren't? Come on, Bink-he'll be there any minute."

"Then shut up and let me work," Bink shot back, irritably swiping at a lock of hair that had fallen down in front of her eyes. She could do this. She had to do this.

And then, from somewhere outside, she heard the unmistakable sound of a closing door.

"He's here," she whispered urgently. "I'll call you back." She keyed off the comlink clip and looked quickly around the bedroom. Even with half a dozen chairs and wide lounge tables scattered around, there was really only one place she could reasonably hope to hide.

She was under the bed, as far back as she could get, when the door opened and someone stepped into the darkened room. From what she could see of his boots, it was almost certainly Rovi.

Bink held her breath, wondering if he would take a moment to clear the room before he got down to business. Most thieves made that a habit, and she suspected thieves who also dabbled in murder would be even more likely to do so. She had a small hold-out blaster, but it was buried beneath her in a belly holster. If he decided to look under the bed, she was finished.

But for once he missed a bet. Closing the door, he headed directly across the room to Lady Vanq's safe. Bink heard the faint sound of clicking code bars, and with a soft thud the door unlocked. The heavy panel swung open, and Rovi disappeared inside.

Keeping one eye on the door, Bink keyed her datapad again. With cracks starting to show at the edges of Chumu's plan, she had little doubt that Rovi's orders were to dissolve the computer patch as soon as he'd replaced the supposedly fake Tchine with the real one and was safely out of the house. Bink had until then to break in and change the text of the murder note. She finished the last two steps in Tavia's instructions:

And with gratifying and about-time speed, she was in.

She'd hidden the Tchine she'd gotten from Jydor's display room just well enough to make it plausible that Rovi could have missed it on his first pass through the safe after the murder. Barely a minute later he'd done the switch and emerged from the safe, closing it behind him and retracing his steps across the room.

But that minute had been all Bink needed. She'd altered the text, put the encryption back in place, and extricated herself from the house computer system.

She waited thirty seconds after Rovi closed the bedroom door behind him. Then, slipping out from beneath the bed, she hurried to the window and the harness tucked out of sight there. Rovi would be returning to the High Card, no doubt wanting to be present when the police swooped in on his soon-to-be-former boss.

Bink had no intention of letting the show start without her.

The hand had just been dealt when Lando spotted Chumu making his way through the crowd of observers to the base of the platform. Apparently all was set, and he'd come to watch firsthand the culmination of his plan.

Lando looked at his cards. It wasn't a bad hand, but it certainly wasn't a great one. Even with the shifting-card system that was part of sabacc, it wasn't likely to get much better.

He set down his cards and took a deep breath. This was going to hurt. "All in," he announced, pushing his small stack of chips into the center of the table.

The other players looked at him, their expressions ranging from disbelief to contempt to suspicion.

Lando agreed pretty much with all of them, especially the contemptuous ones. Unfortunately, he needed to be away from the table when the police arrived, and this was the fastest way to make that happen.

The bidding began, with some fresh spirit infusing the proceedings as the others saw a chance of eliminating one of their number. A few minutes later, after equally spirited play, the hand came to an end.

To no one's surprise, Lando lost.

He stood up, offered the traditional gracious thanks to the other players and to their host, then headed down the steps to the floor below. Choosing a seat where he was in Chumu's line of sight, he sat down and waited.

The wait wasn't long. Phramp had dealt the next hand and the bidding was under way when a sudden surprised murmur rippled across the floor from the ballroom entrance. Lando craned his neck to look just as half a dozen men and

women in the uniforms of Danteel City Police strode into the room and headed toward the double platform.

Lando looked at Jydor. The man was still just sitting there, his face unreadable as he watched the officers' approach. The players, concentrating on the game, seemed largely oblivious.

"Good evening, Lieutenant Stenberk," Jydor called courteously as the group reached the platform and came to a stop outside the lower guard ring. "May I ask what brings you to the High Card at this hour?"

"I'm afraid I have some unpleasant news, Master Jydor," Stenberk said. His tone was also courteous, but it had a grimly official edge beneath it. "I suggest we continue our conversation in your office."

"What kind of unpleasant news is it?" Phramp asked before Jydor could reply. The players had finally become aware of the looming drama, their cards forgotten in their hands as they stared at the police. "Is it something that might affect the tournament? If so, we deserve to know what it is."

"I'm sure it has nothing to do with any of you," Chumu soothed.

"How can you possibly know that?" Phramp retorted scornfully. "No, on behalf of all of us players, I formally request that this be handled out in the open where we can hear what's going on."

"Master Phramp-" Chumu began.

"In fact, I'll go farther," Phramp cut in. "Having paid ten million credits for a seat at this table, I insist that what Lieutenant Stenberk has to say be said right here and now."

Chumu looked up at Jydor and held his hands out helplessly, as if the whole scene hadn't been carefully scripted between him and Phramp. "Master Jydor?" he asked.

"I have nothing to hide," Jydor said, his voice steady but his eyes narrowed. "You may proceed, Lieutenant."

"As you wish," Stenberk said. "I regret to inform you, sir, that Lady Carisica Vanq has been found dead in her home."

Jydor sat up a bit straighter. "She's dead? How?"

Lando shifted his attention to Chumu. There was just the hint of a satisfied smile playing at the corners of the manager's lips.

"It was suicide, sir," Stenberk said. "She shot herself with a blaster."

The smile on Chumu's face vanished. "Suicide?" he gasped. "But...how do you know?"

"She left a note," Stenberk said, turning to face him. "More precisely, she had it transmitted to us."

"There was a-" Chumu clamped his mouth shut. "I mean..."

"The reason we're here, sir," Stenberk continued, looking back up at Jydor, "is that Lady Vanq also possessed a Tchine statue like yours. Under the circumstances-I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," Jydor said. "I'll have Master Chumu get my certificate of purchase and authenticity."

"That would be very helpful, sir," Stenberk said. "We'll also want-a moment, please," he interrupted himself, pulling out his comlink. "Stenberk."

There was a moment of silence as he listened. "Understood," he said. "Thank you, Sergeant."

He put the comlink away. "It turns out the certificate won't be necessary after all," he told Jydor. "We've now been allowed into Lady Vanq's safe, and her Tchine is there."

Chumu's eyes were bulging now, his breath quick and shallow, his face tight with utter bewilderment. "Are you sure it isn't-" He broke off. "I understand some collectors make copies of their artworks," he continued, his voice strained, his words obviously being chosen very carefully. "Are you sure the Tchine you found isn't something like that?"

"Quite sure," Stenberk said, eyeing Chumu thoughtfully. "The sensor profile precisely matches that of a genuine Tchine." He looked at Jydor again. "I'm sorry to have bothered you, sir." He started to turn away.

"Hold it!" Zerba snapped, jabbing a finger at Phramp. "What the-that's a skifter. You've got a skifter!"

"What are you talking about?" Phramp demanded, frowning at his cards. "I don't use skifters."

"Like hell you don't." Zerba gestured emphatically at Stenberk. "You-Lieutenant. Come up here. I want a witness."

"Master Jydor?" Stenberk asked.

"Of course," Jydor said, gesturing to the lieutenant as he stared hard at Phramp. "Let's have a look."

He stepped over behind Phramp as Stenberk climbed the steps. Lando looked at Chumu again, to see that the manager's earlier bewilderment had turned to frozen horror.

Stenberk stepped behind Phramp and plucked the cards from his hand. He touched each corner in turn-"He's right," he told Jydor, offering the other one of the cards. "It's a skifter."

"That's impossible," Phramp protested. "It must have been planted on me."

"How?" Jydor asked. "You dealt that hand."

"I-" Phramp sputtered, looking around the table in bewilderment. "I don't know. But it must have been."

"Get out of here," Jydor said, his voice deadly soft. "I don't ever want to see you in the High Card again."

Silently, his face a mass of confusion and anger, Phramp stood up and headed down the steps, moving like a man in a bad dream.

"Do you want me to arrest him?" Stenberk asked.

"Don't bother," Jydor said, watching Phramp as he moved through the crowd toward the exit. "Someone paid ten million credits to get him into the game. I doubt the punishment he'll receive from his patron for his failure will be easier than the legal penalty for cheating at sabacc."

"You're probably right," Stenberk agreed. "Speaking of sabacc, I'd best let you get on with your tournament. Sorry to have interrupted."

"Not a problem," Jydor said, his eyes still on Phramp. Lando turned to look at Chumu again.

This time, Chumu was looking back at him. And there was murder in those eyes.

Time for Lando to make himself scarce. Standing up, he turned his back on Chumu and headed across the ballroom.

But not toward the main entrance, the direction Phramp had gone. For the next few minutes, that area might not be healthy for Lando to be in.

Fortunately, there was another option. The previous night at this time, he'd noticed that one of the large side chambers separated from the main ballroom by a high archway had been closed for cleaning. Cleaning schedules being the rigid things they often were, there was a good chance it would be closed now, as well.

It was. Slipping past the simple rope barrier that had been set up between the chamber and the ballroom, he picked up his pace, making for the emergency exit at the far end.

"Stop."

Lando allowed himself two more steps before coming to a halt. Keeping his hands visible, he turned around.

Chumu was striding toward him, his face thunderous, a small hold-out blaster gripped in his hand.

"I'd think you'd have better things to do right now," Lando suggested. "Finding a way to clean up your mess, for starters."

"The mess is yours, not mine," Chumu retorted, stopping three paces away and leveling the gun at Lando's stomach. "Who are you? Who are you working for?"

"My name's on the tournament application," Lando said. "And I'm not working for anyone."

"No, of course you're not," Chumu ground out sarcastically. "You just happened to stumble on my plans and decide to spit on them?"

"Actually, that's pretty much exactly what happened," Lando conceded. "Though I suppose in your place I wouldn't believe it, either." He nodded toward the blaster. "You're not seriously thinking about going the revenge route, are you? I doubt the police will believe two blaster suicides in the same day."

"Oh, and that was especially cute," Chumu growled. "What did you do, slice into Rovi's droid-block programming and change the message?"

"Basically," Lando said. "It was a great plan, though. Really. Freezing Jydor out of his own operation while simultaneously taking down his two biggest competitors was sheer genius. Winner take all, just as Jydor announced at the beginning." He considered. "Though now, I suppose, it's more like winner lose all."

Chumu snorted. "What makes you think I've lost?"

"Please," Lando said disdainfully. "What are you going to do, find another of Jydor's rivals you can kill and frame him for? Police do know how to look for patterns, you know."

"What pattern?" Chumu countered. "There's no pattern here. Thanks to you, Vanq's death will go into the data list as a suicide." He raised the blaster a little higher. "And you're right about two suicides looking suspicious. I guess we'll have to kill you in self-defense."

"We meaning you and Rovi?" Lando asked. "Or do you just mean Rovi? Generally, you mastermind types don't handle any of the actual killing yourselves."

"Not normally, no," Chumu agreed. "But in your case, I think I'll make an exception." With his free hand he pulled out another hold-out blaster and tossed it onto the floor at Lando's feet. "Pick it up."

"I don't think so," Lando said, making no move toward the weapon. "I'd hate there to be any misunderstandings when the police arrive."

Chumu shook his head. "Nice try, but the police all went in the other direction."

"They'll be back," Lando assured him. "Right now, they're probably just enjoying the show."

Chumu frowned. "What show?"

"That one." Smiling, Lando raised his hand and pointed upward...

...at the cam droid that Tavia had retasked with the job of following Lando around.

"Winner lose all," Lando said quietly. "And my friend is right. You really do need to pay better attention to your surroundings."

Chumu was standing motionless, apparently with nothing left to say, when Stenberk and his men arrived.

"So how does it feel?" Tavia asked as the police escorted Chumu through the murmuring crowd and out through the ballroom exit. "Doing the right thing, I mean?"

A flip, slightly sarcastic answer popped into Lando's mind. But Tavia deserved better than that. "It feels good," he admitted. He looked back at the platform where the tournament was already in progress again. "It also feels expensive."

"You wouldn't have won," Bink reminded him. "You know that, right?"

"Maybe," Lando said. "Probably." He exhaled a sigh. "You know the worst thing about being a gambler? It's all the wondering about what might have been. How a different play-a different card-a different hand might have made all the difference in the universe."

Bink gave a little snort. "I've got news for you, Lando. That's not a gambler's problem. That's life, for everyone."

"She's right," Tavia said soberly. "Once you make a decision, you can never go back and change it. Sometimes, farther down the line, you have a chance to alter its effects. But the original decision is there forever."

"And we all have those wonderings and regrets," Bink agreed. "There's really only one way to soothe them."

"Time?"

She smiled. "Money." Taking his hand, she pressed something into it. "Here's the ten thousand credits Chumu paid me to tell him the Tchine was a fake."

Lando frowned. "For me? Shouldn't we split it four ways?"

"We should," Bink agreed. "But we aren't going to."

"After all, we dragged you into this," Tavia reminded him. "It's not like winning a forty-million-credit figurine, but it should at least get you off the planet and someplace more promising."

"But-"

"And don't worry about us," Bink admonished, closing Lando's fingers firmly over the credit tab. "If I know Zerba, he's off looking for another job as we speak."

"Or going through other people's pockets," Tavia said disapprovingly.

"Either way, we'll be fine," Bink said. "So go. Shoo."

Lando made a face. But there was a time to object, and a time to simply accept something with thanks.

And it wasn't like he hadn't earned it. "You two take care," he said. Scooping up their right hands, he lifted them to his lips for a quick kiss each.

"We will," Tavia said.

"Until the next job," Bink added with a roguish smile.

"Which will probably be a long time coming," Lando warned.

Bink shrugged. "Maybe. But you never know."

Heist

The world of larceny, like every other field of endeavor, had its collection of conventional wisdoms. Near the top of that list was the warning that pulling off a heist aboard a starliner was a stupid thing to do. With a limited roster of suspects, and with nowhere to run until the ship made port, the odds were dangerously high that a thief would be caught.

Bink Kitik had heard that bit of conventional wisdom many times

throughout her career. But she'd never much worried about the odds.

"You'll be seeing him again tonight?" Bink's sister Tavia asked.

"Unless you think he'll come rushing into my arms with all those pretty jewels if I stand him up," Bink said as she gave herself a final look in their stateroom's mirror.

"I suppose that's unlikely," Tavia conceded, coming up behind Bink and adjusting a stray lock of her hair.

Bink gazed fondly at their side-by-side images, playing her usual game of pretending to be a stranger trying to pick out which of the identical twins was which. Even knowing all the hidden subtleties that distinguished them from

each other it was still a challenge. To the best of her knowledge, no one else had ever figured out how to do it.

It was a happy accident of nature that had come in handy any number of times throughout Binks career. And would do so again tomorrow.

“At least you didn’t have to—you know—in order to get into his stateroom,” Tavia continued, her reflection wincing.

“I appreciate you at least drawing the line there.”

“I know how much that sort of thing bothers you,” Bink said soothingly. In actual fact, given the right circumstances, she would probably have been willing to let herself be lured to Cristoff’s bedroom. It would have been much easier to break into his stateroom’s private safe if she were already on that side of the door.

But while Cristoff had repeatedly angled for an invitation to Bink’s stateroom, he’d never offered to bring her to his. Even people with more wealth than they could spend in five lifetimes were wary of being robbed, and apparently he didn’t buy into the conventional wisdom any more than Bink did.

“How does the mesh feel?” Tavia asked as she finished with Bink’s hair and shifted her hands to the sleek dress wrapped snugly around her sister’s modest curves.

“It’s great,” Bink assured her. Actually, the sensor mesh Tavia had designed, built, and layered into the dress material was a little scratchy. It was also likely to get unpleasantly warm as the evening wore on, especially given that Bink’s neck, shoulders, head, and hands were the only parts of her body the dress didn’t cover. But the thing was such a marvel of electronic engineering that Bink couldn’t bring herself to get picky. “Wish me luck,” she added as she turned from the mirror and headed toward the stateroom door.

Behind her, she heard Tavia’s sigh.

More than anything else, Bink knew, her sister longed for a quiet, peaceful, legal life. Someday, Bink promised herself. Someday, when the big score finally came. Until then, life would continue to be a struggle to keep their heads above water and daily bread on their table.

With luck, Cristoff would soon be making his own contribution to that goal.

Cristoff was one of those men who exuded a carefully tailored mix of gallant, charming, and predatory. Bink had studied it, and him, from a prudent distance before finally making her approach three days earlier. It was a compelling combination, one that had probably worked on most women.

But Bink wasn't most women. She'd also dealt with more than her share of such men since her teenage years, and she knew exactly what they wanted and how they liked to get it. More importantly, she knew that the chase was more to them than the actual conquest, and that an elusive quarry was guaranteed to pique both interest and a heightened level of pursuit.

Most important of all was that fact that, while she knew his agenda, he had no idea of hers.

And so once again she sat beside him at dinner, this time among the elite at the Captain's Table, playing the prey as adroitly as he played the hunter. She laughed at his jokes, occasionally reached out to touch his arm or let him touch hers, sometimes subtly pulled back. After dinner came a couple of drinks, then dancing to the surprisingly entertaining rhythm-skee of the liner's comedy caller, then a couple more drinks.

Finally, pleading fatigue and the upcoming busyness of the cruise's final day looming ahead, she let him escort her to her stateroom door. Once again, he tried to finesse an invitation to come inside; once again, she begged off on the grounds that the falpas sauce he'd ordered for their appetizer glaze had left her stomach a little queasy. Hinting that she would make it up to him after tomorrow's final evening, she offered a down payment in the form of a long, close hug and an even longer and more lingering kiss.

Tavia, as usual, was waiting anxiously for her return. "How did it go?" she asked as she led Bink to the couch and helped her sister out of the tight-fitting dress.

"About as expected," Bink said, resisting the urge to give each freshly released patch of skin a vigorous scratch. She'd been able to ignore the mesh while she

was playing her coy temptress role, but now that she was back in the safety and privacy of their stateroom, the itching had come roaring back. “It took a bit of skip-dancing to get him to order the falpas sauce, but I’m pretty sure he remembers it as being his idea.” She pulled on the soft and delightfully non-itchy robe Tavia had laid out for her and nodded to the dress now draped over her sister’s knees. “The big question is whether it was all worth it.”

“We’ll know in a minute,” Tavia said, moving a small sensor slowly and methodically over the mesh.

“Probably depends on whether you hugged him the way you said you were going to,” she added, her voice carrying a hint of disapproval.

“Someone has to do it,” Bink murmured, suppressing a grin.

“Here we go,” Tavia said, easing the sensor closer to the dress. “Right hip pocket.” She shot Bink a stern look. “I’m not even going to ask how you got in range of that part of his anatomy.”

Bink shrugged. “Hey, if he would be a proper gentleman and always carry his keycard in the same place, I wouldn’t have to resort to such underhanded tricks.”

“Underhanded,” Tavia repeated, making a face. “Cute.”

“Thanks,” Bink said modestly. “The point is that we got it. Which means—”

“Hold it,” Tavia interrupted, peering at the sensor’s display. “What in the...? Oh. Oh, very nice.”

“What is it?” Bink asked, sitting down beside her. The data streaming across the sensor’s display was way too fast for her to read. “What’s nice?”

“Your friend isn’t as stupid as he looks,” Tavia said. “He’s actually expecting to have his pocket picked. Hence, this keycard.”

“I thought it was hence, he moves it randomly from one pocket to another,” Bink said, frowning.

“No, that part is because he doesn’t want to be obvious about it,” Tavia corrected. “See, this keycard will open his stateroom door just fine. It’ll also send a simultaneous alert to ship’s security.”

“Unless he punches in a code somewhere?” Bink asked hopefully.

“No code,” Tavia said. Tapping the reset on the sensor, she started moving it down the dress again. “No, this one’s a hundred percent booby trap. However...”

She paused. “However?” Bink prompted.

“Wait for it,” Tavia said, moving the sensor down toward the dress’s lower hem. “However...ah. The other keycard—the real one—is down here in a sock holster. No way anyone could get that one out without him noticing.”

Bink smiled. “Good thing we don’t need the card itself.”

“A very good thing,” Tavia agreed, studying the display. “I’m also glad I insisted the dress be formal-length.”

“Me, too,” Bink said. Keycards were shielded against sensor scans beyond a few millimeters precisely to prevent this kind of surreptitious scan-and-copy, which was why she’d had to snuggle up so close to him. “But then, it was the Captain’s Table. They expect a certain elegance there anyway.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Tavia eyed her sister. “So it’s on?”

Bink nodded. “It’s on.”

It was the last night of the cruise, the last few hours before the starliner docked at the Kailor V transfer station in the small hours of the morning and the passengers prepared for the mass morning departure. Everyone was decked out in full-bore finery, their outfits designed to attract and impress and, possibly, to finalize unspoken hopes and promises that had been made earlier in the voyage.

And for once, it was Tavia, not Bink, who was dressed to the full limit of elegance and style.

But then, Tavia wasn't really herself tonight. Tavia was, rather, Bink.

"Now, you remember all my catchphrases?" Bink asked as she looked her sister over. Tavia was a lovely woman, Bink had always thought, far lovelier than Bink herself, despite the fact they shared the same face. Unlike Bink, Tavia had an inner poise and a plain, simple likeability that Bink herself always had to work hard to counterfeit.

"All of yours, and all of his," Tavia said, her smile showing just a hint of the tension she was obviously feeling. "I also remember his tastes in music, food, and drink, and all the life stories he told you. Don't worry, I can handle this."

"I know," Bink assured her, trying to put aside her own tension. Tavia had long since resigned herself to the necessity of playing these roles on occasion, and despite her ethical resistance she really was quite good at it. But that didn't mean Bink ever felt comfortable throwing her to the wolves this way. "I'll signal as soon as I'm back."

"Don't cut corners on my account," Tavia said. "I'll be fine."

"I know," Bink said again.

Ten minutes later, Cristoff came by to collect his date for the evening. Hidden inside the 'fresher, Bink pressed her ear to the door and listened closely to the small talk as Tavia collected her purse and wrap and the two of them left the stateroom. Everything sounded all right, but Bink knew that could change in a heartbeat.

She wouldn't cut corners, because that was how a job blew up in your face. But she definitely wouldn't be lingering.

She waited another ten minutes before leaving the stateroom herself, dressed more modestly than most of the preening travelers, and with just enough actor's putty layered across strategic parts of her face that she no longer looked like the woman currently hanging on Cristoff's arm. Cristoff's suite was on the liner's upper-elite deck, behind a locked corridor door which required one of those same elite stateroom keycards to open. The copy Tavia had

created from the sensor mesh data passed this first test, opening the door without fuss and letting Bink inside.

As she'd expected, the corridor was deserted, with all the occupants down in the public areas. Bink walked through the silence, watching and listening for any hint that her unauthorized entry had been detected and tagged. But no security officers or inquisitive droids had shown up by the time she reached Cristoff's door.

Once again, the keycard did its job. Bink went inside, wondering briefly if Cristoff might have pulled some kind of double-reverse that would leave this keycard as the one that would trigger the alarm. But Tavia hadn't seen any hidden coding, and anyway Bink's own reading of Cristoff hadn't indicated that kind of overdeveloped subtlety. Whatever creativity the man possessed would more likely manifest itself in the combination he'd arranged for the stateroom's private safe.

Fortunately, creativity was one of Bink's own specialties.

The safe was exactly as the stateroom floor plans showed it: built into the right-hand side of the computer desk, molecularly bonded to the deck, and constructed of hull-metal slabs thick enough to require a plasma torch, a couple of tanks of fuel, and several perfectly good hours of a thief's life. The electronic keypad was built into the door and surrounded by enough sensor blocks and scramblers to keep anyone from brute-force slicing the combination. Once the pattern was set, only the stateroom's current occupant could get it open.

And Cristoff had recently done just that, Bink saw as she held Tavia's sensor over the keypad. Earlier this evening, probably when he pulled out his rings and the absurdly expensive wristband he liked to show off.

She smiled as she peered at the sensor's display. One of the best things about falpas sauce, aside from its delicious taste, was that the warm, tingling glow it sent through the bloodstream ultimately emerged a few hours later as a slight alteration in sweat composition. Last night's dinner had left traces of distinctive chemicals on the buttons Cristoff had touched, chemicals that could be scanned for.

Which was only half the battle, of course. No one with any brains used a code that utilized any given button only once, and whatever else he might or might not have, Cristoff did have brains.

But Bink had both brains and an experienced eye. The falpas-laden sweat left marks that were distinct enough that she could see the faint double edges where he'd keyed a given button twice, or even three times.

Unfortunately, none of that could tell her the order in which the various numbers had been keyed. For that, she would have to rely on Cristoff's history, his current life, three long days spent hanging onto his every word, and the extensive data-search profile Tavia had worked up while Bink was enjoying the liner's upper-end amenities.

Entering the keystroke data into her datapad, she punched for all the possible combinations. There were, not surprisingly, a lot of them. Calling up Tavia's list of the significant times, dates, and events of Cristoff's life, she ran her eyes down the parallel columns, searching for a match.

And there it was: the date and CTE market number of his first successful corporate takeover, the triumph that had launched him on his path to his current level of wealth and power. Smiling triumphantly, she keyed in the combination.

With a quiet, genteel snick, the safe popped open.

The jewel cases, she knew, would have integrated tracers. So would some of the bigger gems. But Bink hadn't planned to be overly greedy. She dumped out the cases into the safe, spreading the contents around just to confuse the issue a bit, then selected a half dozen of the more modest-sized stones. She put them in an anti-sensor pouch, just to be on the safe side, and slid the pouch behind her belt.

And with that, she was almost done. Almost. Because the minute Cristoff opened the safe and saw the mess she'd left behind there would be hell to pay from one end of the liner to the other.

Which simply meant making sure he never again opened the safe.

A dead energy cell on this kind of sequentially shared public safe typically triggered one of two default modes. The first was for the door to simply unlock, which would allow the current owner to retrieve his or her valuables. The downside there was that it would likewise allow anyone else to do so if he or she got there first. The second, more common approach, was for the safe to lock down completely, requiring a visit from the ship's purser and a specialized power/code pulse to reopen it.

The first step was to make sure the default setting was for a complete safe lockdown. The second was to drain the energy cell. The third was to reset the purser's master code.

Just for fun, she set it to the date and CTE market number of Cristoff's second successful corporate takeover.

She'd given Tavia the all-clear and had been waiting anxiously in their stateroom for nearly an hour when her sister finally returned.

"You all right?" Bink asked anxiously once she'd made sure Tavia was alone. "I was starting to get worried."

"I'm fine," Tavia said, kicking off her shoes and dropping tiredly onto the couch. "Your Cristoff has a great deal of stamina."

Bink felt her eyes widen. "Stamina?"

"On the dance circle," Tavia assured her hastily. "He also drinks way more than he should."

"And tried to get you to match him drink for drink, no doubt," Bink said sourly.

"He tried." Tavia cocked her head. "How about you?"

"No problems," Bink said. "Everyone will assume the safe's malfunctioned, and they'll be hours cutting it open. By the time they realize what really happened we'll be long gone."

"I hope so. How much did we get?"

Bink shrugged. "We're set for the next month. No more than that, I'm afraid."

"A month works," Tavia said, nodding. "There are some good-sized electronics firms on Kailor V. Maybe I can finally get a job that meets with your approval."

"Maybe," Bink said diplomatically. "I'm sure there are jobs like that somewhere out there."

Only there weren't, she knew. Not the kind of job Tavia was looking for.

But they had a month's worth of breathing space. By then, Bink would have something else lined up. Probably something small, but maybe something big.

Maybe even that big score that would finally let them be free of this life forever.

She could always hope.

Followers Of Baba

Agent Mark Hieks of CorSec is your contact with a mission that pays. 'There is a group of Aqualish warriors who make trouble for us here on Talus,' he says.

'They're a little crazy and it doesn't take much to get them riled up,' he says. 'A third-rate bounty hunter named Ponda Baba has come here from Tatooine, and he's stirring up trouble.'

Hieks shows you a holo of the Aqualish, and you note that he's missing one arm. 'Baba met up with ajedi in Mos Eisley, and got his arm lopped off. Looks like it just made him more angry,' he says.

'Anyway,' Hieks says, 'Baba is here and he's rounded up a group of Aqualish buddies to make trouble for the good people of Talus.'

'What we have here,' he says, 'Is a situation that CorSec needs to stay out of. We don't want things to get any worse. We need someone like you, someone without connections, to take him out.'

Checking into the local situation, you discover that the Followers of Baba have come out of their secret base to attack local towns several times over the past week.

You go from town to town, interviewing people and investigating news items when you get lucky. You're talking to the mayor of a village when the Followers attack.

Screaming and hollering in Aqualish, which no one there understands, they race into town firing blasters at everything that moves. You see one of them holding his blaster in the air with one arm, since the other is missing. You have found your target.

The Followers of Baba are filled with anger and fervor, but in the end, they're just a disorganized gang of thugs. When a blow from your weapon knocks down Ponda Baba, his followers scatter. This is the end of their revolution.

Baba is still angry when you clamp the stun cuffs on his arm and ankle. He continues to babble in Aqualish, but you pay him no heed. Soon, you're delivering him to CorSec, and your mission is complete.

DEBRIEFING SUMMARY—LT. MERWON CORR, IMPERIAL DEFECTOR

Analyst's note: *The following statements are excerpts from Alliance Intelligence's post-defection debriefing of Lt. Merwon Corr. As a known former ISB agent, Lt. Corr's credibility is questionable. Agents and others utilizing this data should be aware that it may contain misinformation at best and outright traps at worst. In particular, Lt. Corr's insistence that Byss is more than the Emperor's long-rumored mysterious retreat seems sure to be an Imperial ruse.*

You have to understand how dangerous the Deep Core is, even for Imperial starships. The difficulties are twofold. One is the navigational challenges and hazards created by the natural conditions within the region. It would be simplistic to say that the deeper you get into the Core, the more difficult the conditions. While generally true, the reality is some areas are easier to travel through than others. Getting to a well-known system on an ancient, well-known route like Empress Teta via the Koros Trunk Line is physically possible, if more challenging than the average hyperspace jump. Getting to a world without a hyperroute is extremely dangerous, and nearly suicidal. We lose, I mean they lose, scouts and other ships that make regular runs through the Deep Core on a regular basis.

Even if you get past the physical limitations, you have the Imperial patrols and bureaucracy to deal with. It's not just the natural barriers that keep people out. The Empire set up the Deep Core Security Zone specifically to keep anyone from poking around. You can get in, of course, provided you obtain the right paperwork, permits, and permissions. And you better get them. Anyone found within the Zone without it is arrested immediately. Drop into the wrong system without a proper access code, you might not survive long enough to argue your point. Of course, most people can't pass the background checks, by design more often than not.

Want to go on your own anyway? Making a jump without using an approved route risks smashing into a sophisticated mine or other hazard scattered about the hyperlanes and likely arrival points designed to wipe out unauthorized ships. Random patrols, scout ships, and swarms of probe droids keep an eye on the safest routes. Not coincidentally, they also keep the Imperial astrogation charts up-to-date, which is no small feat.

Why all the security? You've heard the stories. Take your pick. The Empire wants any resources it finds for itself. The worst Imperial prisons in the galaxy are there. The Emperor's hidden retreat holds many secrets. Maybe the Emperor doesn't want anyone going near the supposed ancient homeworld of the misguided Jedi. Maybe he's protecting the galaxy from the evils of the dark side of the Force. Maybe he's training them himself. After all, you do know that the Citadel Inquisitorius, home to those evil, Force-wielding terrors, is deep in the Deep Core. They may not be Jedi, but they know some of their tricks, that's for certain.

I think the stories are all true, after a fashion. I've seen too many ambitious and/or gullible nobles make some sort of pilgrimage out to Byss and never return. Sure, Byss is real. The Emperor's private playground, as near as I can tell. No, I didn't bring proof. There isn't any. Someone will probably kill me just for acknowledging its presence. If half of the stories I've heard are true, well, I'd rather fight with the Rebels than become a mindless slave or pawn in the Emperor's schemes. Less than a pawn, really.

Here's some hard evidence you will believe. This data chip details half a dozen Imperial prison worlds in and near the Deep Core. Not only that, this datapad holds the permits and everything you need to look like an approved supply freighter. It won't last long, as the codes change all the time, but if you hurry, it might hold long enough to rescue your friends. What friends? That's what this list holds. Rebel agents and sympathizers. Go ahead, look at it. I bet there are names on there you didn't even know were missing yet, or thought were dead long ago.

Age Of Rebellion

You Rebel scum!"

I froze, with one hand on the throttle, one on the control yoke, and neither anywhere near my blaster. A sudden turn might tumble the Imperial officer behind me, but the shuttle I was flying wasn't built to do that quickly or well. He would likely shoot me or the controls. I was still alive only because one wrong maneuver at this speed would smash us into a canyon wall.

"Take us down! Now...argh!" A roar cut him off as he was tackled from behind. The attacker's momentum carried both of them between the pilots' seats and smashed the Imperial's face into the center console...and my right hand...and the throttle. The ship surged abruptly toward the canyon wall immediately ahead of us.

"Get off!" I yelled. I pulled back hard on the control yoke while trying to wrench my other hand free. The shuttle surprised me with unexpected agility...just not quite enough to clear the canyon rim. The back of the ship clipped a rocky outcropping with a jarring jolt and worrisome crunch.

The ship's upward angle combined with the collision to send the combatants tumbling toward the back of the cockpit. I glanced back at the fighters. The Imperial had no idea how to wrestle a tall, lanky Ithorian. As the two grappled and thrashed about, the Imperial's head smashed into one of his opponent's mouths, located on the side of its bent, hammer-like head. A pained, earsplitting roar erupted, deafening the Imperial, shaking the cockpit, and dazing me. The Ithorian's massive fist connected with the bewildered officer's jaw, and it was over.

"You know, I never knew that serving under an Ithorian commander would be so hard on the hearing!" I complained to Lieutenant Truno while he dragged the unconscious Imperial out of the cockpit. I assessed the shuttle's damage. When he returned, I said, "Well, we're still in the air. That little bump back there cost us the rear deflectors and stabilizers."

"Just get us to the pickup point," Truno rumbled. "I'll see what I can do." He dashed out of the cockpit and returned a few minutes later. "I've got the shields back online, but the stabilizer is hopeless. At least we made it out." He collapsed into the chair and tended to his wounded mouth.

"Yeah," I said, "I better let the rest of the team know that we acquired, um, alternate transportation." Most of our special operations team had infiltrated a massive Imperial communications hub atop Sunfall Peak. The array was a vital link between the local Imperial forces, their command, and most importantly, their reinforcements. Sabotaging the hub was a risky operation for our enthusiastic but overmatched resistance group. Someone higher up in the Rebel Alliance had ordered the attack as part of a wider operation and was backing us up to make it succeed.

It wasn't over yet. Lt. Truno and I had staged a diversionary attack at an Imperial administration center. The Imperials shot up our ship upon our arrival, so we commandeered and escaped in one of theirs. We were fortunate. The mission briefing didn't mention any Imperial ships.

I opened a comm channel. "Team Bantha to Team Thumper: We're inbound. What's your status?"

The sounds of a blaster firefight crackled over the comm. Agent Corvan's voice boomed through the audible chaos. "The defense system is down and the charges are set. We're at the lower platform, but the blast doors cut us off. We're still inside, pinned down in the corridor between the doors and about fifty stormtroopers!"

That was bad. No time to update them on our problems. Truno said, "We'll use the ship's guns to blow the doors open."

"No! We're too close. You'll blast us, too!" Corvan responded.

I scanned the platform as we descended. It was set back into the mountainside, blast doors providing the only access between the platform and the station's interior. In his excitement, Corvan forgot to mention that the door was almost closed. I keyed the comm. "I've got an idea. Just hold on!"

"Like we have a choice!" he called back. I heard the distinctive chatter of Joreel's juiced-up repeating blaster churning out withering cover fire. The Gran would exhaust her ammo soon, if the overpowered thing didn't just burn itself out. Again.

I set the ship down near the back of the platform, aligning one of the shuttle's forward lasers with the blast door. I leapt up and headed toward the shuttle's hatch. Lt. Truno looked at me questioningly. I grabbed the tool kit and my datapad and yelled, "I've got this. Just be ready to fire when I say so!"

The ship was mere meters from the blast door. I ran to a control panel next to the door. I was a Rebel now, so it was time to put my five years of Imperial Navy experience to better use. I pulled a tool out of the kit and popped a concealed maintenance hatch below

the panel. With the door locked down, breaking into the system unaided was unlikely. Fortunately, I didn't have to.

Blaster shots peppered the inside of the door. This blast door had two layers. Each layer had two panels that slid into place, meeting at an angle. When completely closed, a seam between the two panels cut across at a 45-degree angle. The other layer crossed in the opposite direction. This door had malfunctioned, leaving a small, diamond-shaped opening in the middle, less than half a meter across.

I ran to the opening, triggering my comlink. "Trass, toss the code cylinder through the hole in the door!" Imperial personnel wore code cylinders that granted them security privileges in the facility and computer system. Trass, our very own Bothan spy, had stolen it while casing the place weeks ago.

"We tried that! It didn't work!" she yelled back.

"Just trust me and do it!" I screamed through the opening. By pure reflex, I caught the cylinder before it hit my face. I ran back to the maintenance panel and jammed the cylinder into a port. The security protocols prevented me from opening the door, so I sliced through to the maintenance subroutines. I reversed the door's internal sensors to make it think that it was open. The security system did the rest, opening the door when it believed it was closing it.

A hail of blaster fire chased Corvan, Trass, Joreel, and a half-dozen others all the way to the shuttle's hatch. I yelled "Now, Lieutenant!" into my comlink. The ship's guns fired through the open blast door and down the hallway. A few shots convinced the surviving stormtroopers to dive for cover. I bolted for the ship and hopped aboard as it lifted off. As we ascended, Corvan triggered a remote control. Dozens of explosions rocked the communications array. He looked distastefully at the shuttle and said accusingly, "You lost my ship, didn't you?"

A groan from the cockpit kept me from admitting to abandoning the remains of his ship in the diversionary raid. Corvan, Trass, and I ran forward. Truno pointed above us. I gasped. Dozens of TIE fighters swarmed down from a pair of Star Destroyers in low orbit—more Imperial firepower than we had ever seen on our backwater world.

"I'd say the Imperial Governor wants his shuttle back," Trass said. We looked at her, puzzled. "Didn't you know what you stole? Well, I doubt this show is just for that. I bet the Alliance can get some great local intelligence out of this ship, assuming we survive."

The sensors lit up with more incoming ships. I smiled. "Well, we don't have to do it alone. We have a whole Alliance ready to help." The lead TIE fighters exploded as squadrons of Rebel Y-wings screamed past us. "I'd say their timing couldn't be better."

Dangerous Covenants

N1-FEX kicked the door off its hinges, and we stepped into the cantina.

Kasso smiled slightly. "Never met a door you didn't kick down, eh Fex?"

The droid cocked his massive head slightly, as if confused. "It is a door. How else should I open it?"

I rolled my eyes and brushed past him. "Let's just get a drink, huh? It's been a long day."

The cantina, like most dives on this burnout planet, was dark, damp, and smelly. We grabbed a table near the back, and the bartender bustled over with a round of lum. His eyes shifted towards the door, then towards me. I glared, and he scurried back to his bar.

Fex stared at his mug for a long moment, then pulled a cloth out of his immense traveling case, dipped it into the lum, and carefully started cleaning the blaster scorch off his torso. Kasso took a long pull and grimaced, then sighed and relaxed. "I'm going to find the refresher."

I waved my hand idly, focused on my own lum. I had just finished the drink, and was trying to catch the bartender's attention, when four mangy individuals sauntered over to my table.

"Tera," the lead scum said with a smile. "Nice to see you."

"Wish I could say the same, Vols," I said. Fex continued his cleaning. "But I'm sure you have important things to do some other place."

Vols didn't take the hint. "Tera, Tera, Tera. Boss Gorgen's not going to be happy to see you hanging around the old neighborhood. 'Less you've come back to work for him..."

"I told you, and I told Gorgen. I'm done doing his dirty work."

He shook his head. "Then you've got nothing protecting you while you're here. How sad."

My left arm, the cyber one, crushed the heavy bronzium mug, spilling lum all over the table. I looked in Vols's eyes and gave him a grin that was all teeth. "You sure about that?"

His thugs took a step back, and even Vols looked a bit shaken. But then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a vibroblade. "Famous last words, Tera."

It looked like the conversation was just about over, so I threw the crushed mug at his face. It bounced off his forehead and sent him stumbling back, giving me enough time to stand and follow the mug up with my chair.

It hit him right in face, breaking his nose with an ugly crunch. He toppled in a spray of blood, his buddies panicked, and everyone started pulling blasters. I dove for the floor. "Fex! It's killing time!"

The big droid looked up. "Oh?" His photoreceptor turned from blue to bright red. "Oh!" He stood, knocking the table aside, and grabbed his case. Blaster bolts bounced off his chassis as the case fell away to reveal a light repeating blaster. "Hello, my friends!" he bellowed as he opened fire.

Things got a bit crazy. Fex blasted apart tables, chairs, and the occasional thug, while the rest of Vols' goons did their best to return the favor. The rest of the patrons either sprinted for the exits, or grabbed their own blasters and joined in indiscriminately. I scrambled across the floor, where Vols was trying to stand, and brought him back down with a savage kick to the knee. One of his thugs dove at me, and I grabbed his jacket, spun, and sent him face-first into the edge of a table.

A small, blinking sphere flew over the heads of the crowd, landing in the middle of the cantina. Someone shouted "Run! It's a thermal detonator!"

Patrons and gangsters alike stampeded for the exits. Fex was about to follow, but I grabbed his arm. "Wait a sec." Fex's photoreceptor brightened for a moment, then dimmed back to blue upon seeing me.

As the last few people ran screaming, Kasso sauntered out from the refresher with a smirk. "Not too bad, huh?"

"Did you just break up a cantina fight with a thermal detonator?"

He raised a placating hand. "No, no. I just used a decoy, is all." He reached for his belt pouch. "The real thermal detonator is right..."

His hand came out from the pouch empty. "Oh. We'd better go."

Ten seconds later, I staggered to my feet and looked at the flaming wreckage of what had once been a cantina. "Nice job, Kasso. You moron."

The Weequay rolled over in the mud, coughing. "Hey, it seemed like a good idea at the time."

Fex stood in the middle of the street, staring at the durasteel spike running through one of his legs. "This will take some serious polishing to fix," he said somberly.

I hauled Kasso to his feet, and waved to Fex. Even on this backwater world, I could hear the sound of sirens. "Let's get to the spaceport, guys. I think we've worn out our welcome on this rock. Maybe the next place we end up, someone'll pay us for this kind of work."



GRINNER'S TALES OF TREASURE HUNTING

The *Sa Nalaor*? Well, now that's going back a bit. There was a time when every treasure hunter in the Outer Rim was out there looking for that long-lost Separatist flying vault. While the truth and the *Sa Nalaor* rarely seem to go together, one thing's for sure: the *Sa Nalaor*'s infamous for disappearing.

Here's one version of the story, and it might even be true: at the end of the Clone Wars, a Separatist captain loaded up his ship with every credit and ingot he could fit. When the Separatist movement collapsed, off he went. He made a mad dash up the Perlemian Trade Route and took along the best cybertechs in the galaxy.

Well, the new Imperials wouldn't have any of that. Maybe they feared a new cyber war or Outer Rim warlord, but it's more likely they thought they were just hunting down yet another fleeing Separatist commander. In any case, the Imperials chased them up the Perlemian Trade Route.

The *Sa Nalaor* must have had a jittery hyperdrive, because we've got tales of skirmishes all the way to the Outer Rim. Right when the Imperials were about to blow the ship to pieces—*barr!* The ship disappeared in one last hyperspace jump. That was it. No one's seen it since.

Some say the ship simply disappeared in a hyperspace mishap. Others report sightings out in deep space, believing the ship might be lost between the stars. Every so often, someone reports debris on a remote Outer Rim planet. Problem is, there were so many Separatist ships fighting during the war—and scattering afterwards—that there's a lot of lost ships to find. So, you might find something if you want to look hard enough. Just not the *Sa Nalaor*. At least, not yet.

Edge Of The Empire

Bounty hunters! Run!"

I bolted. I didn't need to be told again. They weren't taking me back to Logron. Ahead, Sona decided the sun-drenched alley was too exposed and dove into a shadowed archway.

"Come...argh!" the Bothan groaned, suddenly reappearing as she bounced off something hard, landing on her back in the sandy street. I slowed to a jog, grabbed her hand, and yanked her back to her feet without stopping. "Didn't see the door. Too dark," she cursed. As we picked up speed, she pressed something into my hand. A blaster pistol.

"So, now you trust me?" I asked.

"Barely. Just point it at the bounty hunters." She looked behind us. Our twisting path through Mos Shuuta's alleyways blocked the hunters from view. I momentarily panicked as a pair of humanoid figures sprinted around the corner, but I quickly realized they were Sona's friends, the Pero brothers. At least, I thought the Twi'leks were her friends. I barely knew any of them.

Stun bolts buzzed by the Twi'leks as they turned the corner. The hunters were much too close for comfort.

We all ran harder. At least the stun bolts told us they wanted us alive...for now.

"There's no way Logron's hunters could find us that fast!" I yelled at Sona. We had escaped Logron's desert farmstead hideout less than an hour before, after we smashed his comm gear and took the only speeder. Logron (all-around scum, minor crime lord, and illegal bounty hunter kingpin) had left unexpectedly, and we seized the opportunity to break out of our makeshift cell. His otherwise-inept guards managed to blast the landspeeder as we zipped away. Its repulsorlift died five minutes outside Mos Shuuta, crashing us into a conveniently-located sand dune.

"They're not Logron's," Sona shouted back. "I think they're after the Pero brothers. Coson and Rels must owe someone BIG. They always attract bounty hunters."

The Twi'leks caught up to us when we slowed to turn down a side street. The older one, Coson, replied, "If they're after us, they're new. Don't recognize them." A barrage of stun bolts announced the hunters' reacquisition of their targets. Us.

Sona pointed up toward a tall structure that dwarfed the buildings around us. "There's the bay! Go left!" A throng of people clogged the cramped outdoor market street ahead. Sona led us down a parallel side street. We emerged near a cliff face—not unexpected, given that Mos Shuuta covered the top of a small mesa. We turned right, expecting to run between the buildings and the cliff edge, but a towering, teetering stack of crates and junk blocked the way.

"Wonderful," groaned Rels. The hunters would be here in moments.

I grabbed Rels' wrist. "Come on, we'll skirt around the outside. Just don't push me off the cliff!" I turned sideways, as there was just enough of a ledge to get around the junk. I tried to touch the pile as little as possible. Predictably, Rels slipped and panicked. He grabbed the nearest stable thing to save himself—me. I seized his hand and his momentum yanked me towards the edge. I clutched the pipe I'd been using to balance myself, but it found no footing in the pile. The edge under Rels' feet crumbled and suddenly I was holding us both, dangling by one arm from the pipe. The pipe finally caught on something and held, but both it and my arm threatened to come loose at any moment.

Then, Rels went limp. Unconscious. I began to curse him all the way to Ryloth when a stun bolt glanced off the pile nearby. I'd forgotten about the bounty hunters. They had hit Rels. I looked back and saw Sona halfway up the pile, returning fire from behind a smashed crate. Coson scrambled fearlessly across the ledge towards us. He grabbed his brother by the arm and we hauled him up. We slung him over my shoulder and I carried him to safety behind some of the junk.

The pile lurched as Sona jumped down to join us, having taken the high road over the top. She jammed some kind of stim into Rels. He began to revive, but not quickly enough.

I peeked around the corner and saw the bounty hunters—Rodians—walking nimbly along the ledge. "Come on, Coson," I yelled at the strong Twi'lek. "PUSH!" I lowered my shoulder and we slammed into the pile. A dozen random containers tumbled down on the Rodians just before the whole pile lurched and slid off the cliff side in an avalanche of junk. I didn't see whether or not the Rodians went over with it. We ran.

Sona defeated the landing bay door's security in moments. To my surprise, inside stood a very familiar, very worn freighter. It was disk-shaped, with its cockpit offset on the starboard side. Its color scheme of equal parts blue and rust seemed to visibly crack and fade in the bright sunlight that streamed in through the landing bay's open top. Sona ran up the boarding ramp to the hatch. She punched in a code and the hatch sprung open. She sprinted toward the cockpit, leaving me and Coson to lead the staggering Rels into the ship.

I strapped myself into the copilot's seat as the Rodians (or at least some of them) ran into the bay and we roared into the sky. As we cleared the atmosphere, and

the horizon turned from blue to black, I turned to Sona, a question burning in my mind. I kept my hand on the blaster in my lap, but didn't pick it up. Not yet, anyway.

"No one could break into a ship that fast. How did you know the code to Logron's ship?"

Sona laughed. "It's MY ship. I owed him some cash, and Logron decided to alter our deal and take the ship instead. The Pero brothers and I tracked him to the farm but got caught by some of his hunters. We figured out too late the ship was in Mos Shuuta."

My mind raced with this unexpected turn. "How long have you owned this ship?"

"Years."

My blaster came up instantly. Sona's smile vanished. "Hey, hold up, I told you to point that thing at bounty hunters."

"I think I am. My cousin disappeared six months ago on Tatooine, and she was last seen being taken aboard a blue freighter. This one. An informant in Mos Eisley told me Logron owned it and used it for bounty hunters. I found his hideout at the farm, but his guards caught me and threw me in with you and the brothers. I don't know or care what you're mixed up in. I'm out here looking for my cousin. If it's your ship, you know where she is."

"I'm a smuggler, not a bounty hunter. Coson and Rels are my crewmates. Your cousin was in trouble with Jabba the Hutt, so I smuggled her offworld." Sona sighed, "You know, I always regret coming to Tatooine."

"I'm sure you do," said a voice from behind us. We spun around, and I instinctively aimed my blaster at the intruder. "As do I. Regret your coming here, that is. You're trouble." A tall, well-dressed human with short black hair and a full beard stood in the cockpit doorway, his blaster aimed at us. It was Logron. In the rush, we hadn't checked the ship. He could have been almost anywhere onboard.

"You did me no favors leading my Rodian ex-partners right to me. Now, you will land this thing at Mos Eisley." He trailed off, staring out the cockpit window behind me and Sona, which suddenly glowed. We turned to see the bright white triangular hull of an Imperial Star Destroyer, which had just dropped out of hyperspace.

I turned around and shot the scum. Logron fell to the deck, stunned. Unconscious.

Sona looked from me, to the blaster, to Logron, to the Imperial ship outside. She smiled broadly and said, "You know, I think you're right. Today I am a bounty hunter. I bet those Rodians knew something we didn't about Logron. Let's make a few credits, then see to your cousin." Sona grabbed the comlink microphone. "Captain Sona Fey'lya of the *Blue Flare* to Imperial Star Destroyer. You have great timing. I'd like to claim an Imperial bounty. Shall we deliver, or do you want to pick up?"

Edge Of The Unknown

Just...you know, keep it busy!"

The gigantic, ten-legged spider reared up and howled, and Janese spared me a look she reserved for the irrevocably insane. "Keep it busy, Levat? That's your plan?"

"Well, I'm sorry, Jan, but my ancient Rakatan is just a little rusty. So if I'm going to get this temple door open before that... whatever that is comes over here and has us for lunch, I need a few minutes!"

"Not to worry, ma'am." Keth had his rifle case open and snapped the pieces of his hunting weapon together as he spoke. "You keep that creature engaged, and I may be able to eliminate it with a clear shot."

Janese glared at us both for a long moment before throwing up her hands. "Fine! I just hope that after it's done with me, it doesn't decide it's not hungry." She jogged across the stone plaza toward our landspeeder as the spider finished clambering through the ancient stone arch on the far side, its sixteen beady eyes scanning the ruins for food. I heard her swearing about "red-eyed, blue-skinned psychopaths" as she left.

The Chiss finished attaching the stock of his hunting rifle. He didn't spare me a glance before sprinting in the other direction toward a pillar where he could presumably get a better shot at the spider.

"Mammals," I muttered.

The temple door was more of a gate—a ten-meter-high slab of some sort of fused rock that fit flush with the rest of the temple wall. The structure stretched more than a hundred meters into the air, and as far as we could tell, this was the only entrance. From top to bottom, someone had spent a great deal of time carving an intricate combination of bas-relief and blocky script into every square centimeter of the door. The script was Rakatan, I was sure, but the temple was constructed later than their mythical "Infinite Empire." Maybe it was built by the Tionese, or perhaps it was an offshoot of one of the Empress Teta sleeper colonies...

Behind me I heard a whoop as Janese maneuvered our battered landspeeder between the spider-creature's legs, the monster roaring in frustration as it attempted to spear her with its razor-sharp hooves. No doubt it was all very impressive, but that wasn't going to get me any closer to interpreting how to get this door open.

Now, that phonetic cluster that meant "God of Storms," if I remembered correctly. And that phrase

meant roughly "Unleash." That didn't seem too important, except it was near the writing that wrapped in a circle around a hand-sized disk in the center of the door, just high enough to reach. If my Rakatan was right, that writing spelled out the ancient equivalent of "Push here to open." However, it was the other words, plus a phrase that I think said "Heathens be warned," that worried me.

The sound of a blaster rifle cut through my reverie. Keth had finished climbing the pillar and had taken his shot at the spider-creature. The smug Chiss's aim was spot on as usual; his bolt hit the creature in one of its eyes. It reared back on its hind legs, howled in pain, and then shook its head and charged the pillar.

Keth jumped clear just before the creature hit, but the pillar disintegrated under the blow. The creature seemed merely enraged. Janese spun the speeder around to snatch up the stunned hunter before the spider-creature recovered, but it looked like we were going to need some serious firepower to get through the monster's hide. Just like we'd need some serious protection to avoid whatever pitfall waited on the other side of this door...

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my flare gun, leveled it at the spider-creature's face, and pulled the trigger.

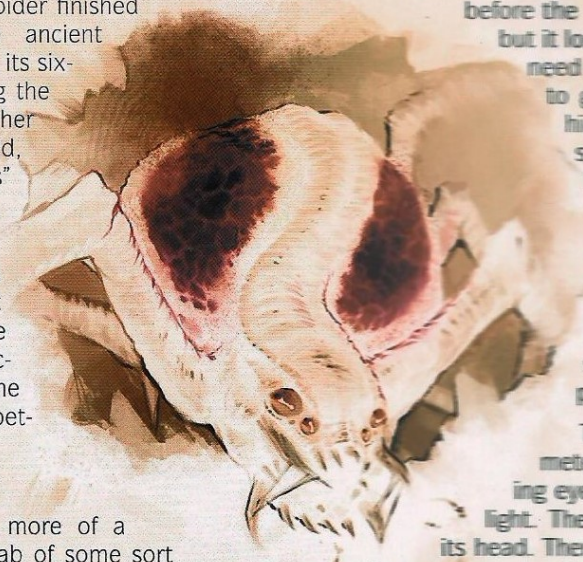
The flare exploded centimeters from its fifteen remaining eyes, dazzling it in a burst of light. The creature howled, shaking its head. Then, furious, it turned to face its new tormentor. Suddenly, I had fifteen tons of enraged spider-creature charging at me.

Just before I ended up mashed into Duros paste, I jumped sideways, trying to get as far away from the door as possible. The creature was many things, but it wasn't agile; the diamond-hard hooves skittered on the stone as it tried to change direction midcharge. Instead it skidded straight into the door.

The rock shattered under the blow, and that triggered the twenty-thousand-year-old booby-trap. A massive, brilliant electrical discharge fired off from all around the door, cutting the spider-creature in half and sending ichor, bits of charred carapace, and snapping mandibles flying in all directions.

By the time Keth and Janese made it back to me, I was leaning next to the smoking corpse, straightening my hat and lighting a cigarra.

"Door's open," I said. "What took you so long?"



Far Horizons

It had been a long day already. The dead body just made it longer.

"I want that no-good ghhhk-oil salesman strung up for the murder of my boy!" Solk Horgon shouted.

I leaned against the doorframe of the marshal's office. "Solk, you may be king nerf baron 'round here, but we've got law and order in this town, same as any other."

"I didn't see no 'law and order' when they found my Seth behind the theater with his neck broke!" Horgon snarled. "Now you hang that Chevin, or step aside and let me."

I none too subtly tapped my hands on the holsters of my twin pistols. "Alchibi'll stand trial, and if he's guilty, he hangs. Not before. Now get on back to your ranch."

Horgon's face got even darker. "You haven't heard the last of this, Marshal!" He turned on his heels and stormed down the street.

I sighed and walked back inside my office. From the containment cell in the far corner, my prisoner watched me soberly.

"I appreciate you not 'stringing me up,' Marshal Sterne," Alchibi Des said in his booming, rumbling voice.

"Day's not over yet, Alchi." I plopped down at my desk, calling up the crime scene holos. Seth Horgon stared up blindly from the alley dirt, his neck snapped cleanly. "You still haven't given me an alibi for last night, and you're plenty strong enough to do the deed. Plus you and the Horgons haven't been on the best of terms."

"It is compelling, though circumstantial," Alchibi replied. "But I was in a confidential meeting."

"You stick with that story, you might as well tighten the noose yourself," I grumbled. "Listen, Alchi—"

"Hi Marshal! Hi Alchi!" A young, well-built Twi'lek popped in through the door.

I grunted. "What are you doing here, Mali?"

Malisan held up a basket of food. "Brought Alchi lunch from the ranch. Better than the reheated Imperial Army rations you eat, Marshal."

A Chevin's face wasn't built for smiling, but Alchibi brightened slightly. "Malisan. You are too kind. But you should be spending your break practicing your dance performance, not bringing me food. Besides, if Horgon catches one of his indentures bringing me lunch—"

"Oh, nonsense," Malisan sat the basket on my desk and started pulling roasted nerf and tubers out of it. After a moment, he looked up at me—and the crime holos. I saw the worry behind his cheerful demeanor.

"They're not going to hang him, are they?"

"Not if he's innocent, Mali," I replied, and wished I believed it.

"You're not going to hang him, Solk!" I shouted.

Horgon and his hired hands responded with a volley of blaster fire that lit up the night sky, blew in the rest of the windows, and set the door on fire.

"You missed!" I hollered, and sent a shot through the window into the darkened street. Malisan crouched in the corner of the office. He had returned to spend time with Alchibi, and, like me, was trapped when Horgon and his crew returned for some mob justice.

From his cell, Alchibi shook his head somberly. "Marshal Sterne. The situation seems dire. I would rather surrender than see you and Malisan dead."

I opened my mouth to tell him not to be an idiot, but Mali beat me to it. "No, you can't!" He stared at me, fear and guilt running across his face. "Marshal, you can't let him do that."

I looked at Mali for a long moment, then groaned. "Ah, hell. Alchi, you were meeting with Mali at the theater last night, weren't you?"

Mali looked guilty, but also relieved. "He was going to buy out my indenture contract from Horgon. Sponsor my dancing. But he didn't kill Seth."

"No," I shook my head. "I'm guessing you did that."

Mali looked sick. "Seth told Alchi he wouldn't sell my contract. He said I'd be stuck herding nerfs all my life. He said he liked seeing an indenture in his proper place. He, he laughed. I just...snapped. I didn't mean to hurt him."

The three of us sat there, looking at each other for a long moment. Then another blaster bolt punched through the wall. "Send him out, Sterne," Horgon belted. "Or we'll burn you out!"

"Oh, to hell with it." I scrambled across the floor, hitting the containment cell's control panel. The energy barrier flickered out as I kicked my desk away from the trap door hidden beneath it. Alchibi and Malisan stared at me.

"Well, what are you two waiting for?" I snarled. "It leads out of town." I punched in the combination to the office safe, and pulled out the thermal detonator I'd confiscated from the spice runners three months ago. "I just need to cover our tracks."

A half hour later, we stood on the hill outside town and watched the townsfolk putting out the last of the fire that consumed my office. That was good; I really hadn't wanted to burn down all of Main Street.

Alchibi snuffled. "I am sorry about this, Marshal." Malisan nodded silently.

"Oh, Horgon was a jerk anyway, and his son was no good trash," I grinned wryly. "On the other hand, looks like I'm out a job. If you're still going off-planet, can I tag along?"

Jewel Of Yavin

The security guard at the penthouse never saw one of the shadows in the hall reach out and strike him. All was silence and stillness after that until the midnight-furred Defel stepped out of the darkness and growled briefly into his comlink. "Inner patrol dealt with. All clear to proceed."

Gantel Dro and his crew had a lot of credits riding on their operation tonight. The client had impressed upon them the difficulty of the task—to steal a famously unstealable corusca gem from within the secure vault of a penthouse in Coruscant's upper levels—and had even detailed what had happened to the last few would-be thieves who had gone after it. But the Defel was confident enough in his crew—a pair of humans, Jera and Kerr, and an Aqualish street tough, Deelo—to make up for any doubts he had about the client. The credits would cover the bribes he needed for a slicer to get their records cleared and their ship freed from impound. They just needed to make their move.

"Deelo, report," he murmured into his comlink. There was only the slight crackle of static interference from surrounding security systems. Gantel scowled. "Deelo! Report, blast it!"

It should have been plenty of time for the Aqualish to investigate the disturbance—and to break the neck of any guard who was passing by if it proved necessary—but he hadn't heard any updates for minutes now. Gantel hadn't moved a meter farther through the vent system since the last alert, crouched in wait.

Suddenly, his comlink came to life. For a brief second, he gathered a few choice curses on his lips, when the speaker cut him off.

"Gantel Dro! You are under arrest for breaking and entering, attempted robbery, and crimes against the Empire! We have your associates in custody. Exit the air vents at the following coordinates and attempt no resistance."

His heart stopped as he heard a blaster shot in the distance. "Your Aqualish friend has already learned the penalty for resisting Imperial law. Let's hope you show more discretion, as the humans did."

Things were bad, as sure as slime on a Hutt. But the day some sun-blinded human caught a Defel thief in the dark was not one Gantel Dro ever expected to see. At least he'd be able to exit the vents at a different opening and escape into the night, but there was nothing he could do for his crew now.

He hurried through the vents with a speed most would have found impossible in such tight quarters and hopped out into a small side room.

Just a little bit further, he thought, holding out hope that he'd be able to make a break for it. He lingered in the shadows a moment longer, ears pricked for footsteps, voices. Silence. He took a deep breath and exited through the open door only to face a cluster of guards

in dark uniforms waiting for him, blaster rifles at the ready. Their commander approached from down the hall, parting the guards as he stepped toward the Defel.

The grim expression on the Imperial's face made the heavy blaster barrel look almost inviting. It was a countenance Gantel Dro had seen before, and as the realization struck him, his talons pressed hard into his palms. Though he felt the warmth of blood ooze against his fingertips, it was all he could do not to launch himself at the man. "Grayson," he swore.

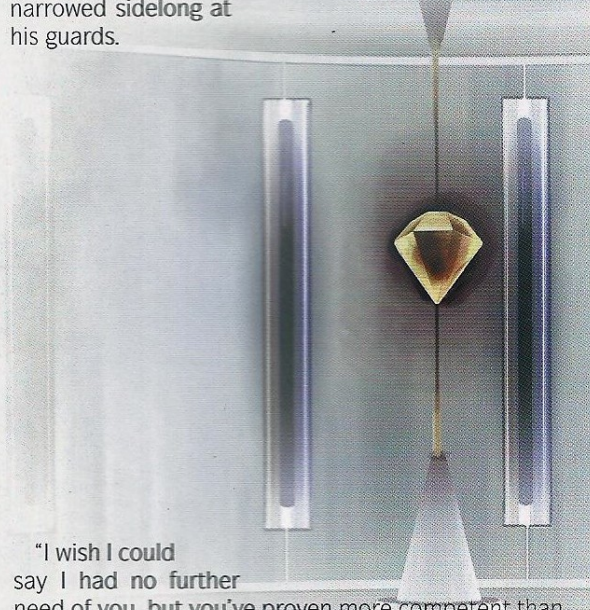
"It never ceases to amaze me just what you alien scum are capable of," the treacherous client muttered with a scowl. "I never believed my agents could find me a thief of your skill and capability in the Core Worlds, but Jera and Kerr served admirably. And I certainly didn't expect you to get this close to the jewel! I suppose I can consider my defenses tested." The Imperial's grimace twisted and sharpened as his eyes narrowed sidelong at his guards.

"I wish I could say I had no further need of you, but you've proven more competent than my so-called security team," he said. "If you are willing to forgive my deception, I'd like to extend the terms of our agreement. Protect my gem instead of stealing it, and I'll not only pay for your transport back to the Rim, I'll oversee it myself."

A growl bubbled up from Gantel's throat. "And if I don't?"

The Imperial didn't respond but simply gestured to a guard. The guard sighted down his blaster rifle, and Gantel scrambled back into his corner. "All right!" he breathed, eyeing the threat defiantly. "All right. I'll handle the operation. As long as our Outer Rim stop isn't Kessel."

At the last remark, Marus Grayson almost smiled. "No," he purred. "The destination is rather more scenic than Kessel. Tell me, Gantel—have you ever heard of a world called Bespin?"



Suns Of Fortune

"I'm a little busy right now, Gus!"

I could hear the Drall give a disapproving tsk over the comlink. "Come now, Tala, this is important. You're just driving a swoop, you can pay attention."

"Racing a swoop, and—" I yelled and ducked as vicious blades of razorgrass whipped by my head. "—it's not as easy as it looks!"

I shot through the razorgrass grove, spinning my swoop desperately to avoid the murderous crystalline blades, then pulled out over a long stretch of bubbling, steaming mud. I went low, skimming less than a meter above the swamp, my repulsorlifts kicking up a fantail of boiling sludge. Just ahead, I could see a red blur through the mist. Jostero's swoop.

"How you doing, Tala?" Conevor's worried voice cut in over Gus's grumbling. "You catch up to Jostero yet?"

"I'd be doing better without your questions," I snapped. A fallen tree capped the far end of the mud flats, forming a sunken arch. Over or under; I chose over. The swoop's afterburners boomed and I soared over it in a long arc, coming down hard enough that I almost cratered in the swamp despite the repulsorlifts. For a moment I lost sight of Jostero, then I saw him pulling a beautiful little high-speed side slip around a rocky outcropping. He glanced back as he did it and I caught the flash of his perfect teeth. I gritted mine.

"Hey, just a little worried about losing my ship, Tala. That makes this a big deal," Conevor said as I shot past the same outcropping. Turns out it was on the edge of a ravine. A ravine lined with razorgrass. I power dove into the gulch and pulled the hardest right I could. Half a dozen razorgrass spines snapped off my steering vanes; one tore down my arm. I didn't spare a second to look at it—the ravine zigzagged like a drunken Gamorrean—but the burning pain told me nothing good. Luckily, I could still shout.

"Listen, you nerf-herding moron!" Left turn. "I wasn't the one who thought it would be fun to slum on Treasure Ship Row." Razorgrass clump. "I wasn't the one who got in with a bunch of kriffing privateers." Right turn. "And I certainly wasn't the one who started talking up how my pilot—" Whoops, big rock. "—was the hottest jockey this side of Kessel, and you'd wager anything, including your ship, on a race—"

"Ahem," Gus cut in. "As much as I enjoy listening to your verbal tirade, I think you should both know that Jostero's crew has been talking amongst themselves. They've decided that even if you win, Tala, they are still going to kill everyone and take Conevor's ship."

Silence on the coms.

"What are we going to do?" Conevor said quietly.

"I have a plan," Gus replied. "However, I need some time to enact it. Tala needs to keep racing. Maybe she can even win."

"Right," I said sourly. "No problem."

We were coming up to the end of the course. The ravine terminated in a cliff face, the track splitting off at the last moment and running down a steep but navigable path. Jostero still had the lead, and if I didn't get ahead of him before that cliff...

Just then I saw Jostero's red swoop pop out of the ravine, heading for the cliff path. No choice. I hit the throttle and powered straight ahead.

The swoop shot out of the ravine and soared, fifty meters above the swamp basin. Razorgrass grew in huge, five meter high clumps, everywhere below me. I was falling fast; I aimed the swoop at the closest thing to a clear patch and hoped.

The impact nearly blew the repulsorlift, bent the vanes, and shattered the faring. But somehow, miraculously, none of the meter long blades impaled the swoop—or me. Sputtering, listing, and leaking smoke, my swoop limped into the clearing where Conevor, Gus, and Jostero's gang waited.

When Jostero pulled in, I could see the open-mouthed astonishment on his face. I took off my crash helmet and tried to act cool. "Glad you could make it, Jos."

Conevor stepped forward. "Well, I guess we win the bet, right?" I could see the sweat beading on his brow.

Some of Jostero's boys started reaching for their pockets. Jostero shook his head. "Yeah...about that..."

The crack of a hypersonic airspeeder drowned out anything else he had to say. A long-range recon speeder in CorSec colors shot in low over the valley, spiraling around the clearing. An amplified voice boomed. "Stay where you are. You are all under arrest!"

Jostero swore and waved to his crew. "Let's get out of here!"

Gus gestured to our speeder. "Leave the swoop, Tala. Conevor, we should follow their example."

As I hopped into the driver's seat, I glared at Gus. "Awfully convenient, CorSec showing up."

The diminutive humanoid smiled placidly. "I'm sure it's just a coincidence that they received a call about illegal swoop racing in the northwestern Agrilat. Now, since you outraced a privateer captain, I assume outrunning law enforcement will not be a problem?"

Stay On Target

"Watch yourself! Fighters coming in!"

"Got it, Blue Leader," I snapped back as squadrons of TIE fighters erupted from the *Imperial Protector's* launch bay and formed up between us and the carrier. "Who's ambushing whom here?" I dodged incoming fire from the *Protector*. It was more irritating than accurate at this range, but that was changing by the moment as our X-wing squadron rapidly closed the distance to the target.

Never mind that it wasn't the target we expected.

This wasn't even the first time this had happened. Our raids along Ral's Run proved that either the Imperials regularly swapped out their supply ships, or that our spy network wasn't as accurate as we hoped. Today was proof that it needed to be much better. Instead of an armed star galleon with a light escort vessel, we faced an Imperial escort carrier and its fighters.

"No sign of a star galleon," Blue Seven reported, with a hint of disappointment.

"This has to be a setup," I said. It wasn't the first time that had happened either. "They're on to us."

"Doesn't matter, Blue Five," replied Blue Leader. "Everyone, you know your targets. Go now."

The squadron surged forward. We could destroy the carrier with our proton torpedoes, but we had to get through the TIE fighters first. They were closing the gap far too quickly for TIEs, though.

Blast it—they were TIE interceptors.

"Hey, Five, it's your favorite targets," Blue Seven teased, "Bet you don't make ace today!"

"Just you watch, Dex," I shot back in irritation. She was right. I'd never scored an interceptor kill. They were top-line fighters flown by Imperial aces. I usually needed rescuing. Worse, Dex earned her ace designation by saving me twice.

Bright green laser fire lanced through our formation as the interceptors came into range. Half of us engaged the fighters, and the rest of the squadron punched through their lines to attack the carrier. The faster interceptors engaged us while relatively slower standard TIE fighters defended the ship.

I hoped my extra hours in the simulators paid off, or this wasn't going to end well. My wingman, Blue Six, and I fired quick bursts from our four wingtip lasers as we broke off and everyone chose their targets. The shape of the battle changed from mass ambush tactics to dogfights between individual pilots.

Six and I tried to take down a pair of interceptors chasing Blue Nine. They broke off their attack and circled back around. Our X-wings couldn't beat the interceptors on speed or maneuverability, but we had equal firepower, better shields and better

armor. As usual, my laser fire tracked just behind my target in a futile attempt to score a hit.

"This isn't working, Six. We..." An enormous burst of green energy shredded my shields and jolted my fighter as a pair of interceptors flashed by. I yanked the stick around and squeezed off a snap shot. To my surprise, only three laser streams bracketed the fighter, but it worked anyway. An explosion of green, ionized gas scattered debris and marked the interceptor's end.

The other fighter peeled off, running from the deadly laser fire of another X-wing. I hoped it wasn't Dex again, but remembered that her assignment was attacking the carrier. Bolts, my back-seat astromech, squealed through the comlink. It only took one glance out the cockpit window to see why. My upper port laser cannon was gone, along with a chunk of wing tip. Damage control systems reported the rest of the story.

"Bolts, reroute power from the cannon to the shields. Try to buy us some time." The simultaneous attacks had blasted through my shields in one pass. My wingman was worse off, limping away from the battle and trying to clear the planet's gravity well to jump to hyperspace and safety. I was isolated and cut off from the rest of the squadron, a dangerous spot for any fighter.

I still had my remaining attacker target locked. He shook his pursuers and arced back around to finish me off. If I was destroyed, he would easily catch Six. I had a straightforward and crazy plan to save us.

"Bolts! Max out the forward shields! Give 'em everything except guns and engines." If this didn't work, we wouldn't be around to need anything else. I aimed the ship at the incoming Imperial and put my craft into a tight barrel roll. I hoped the concentrated laser barrage would make up for the missing weapon and disrupt the Imperial's attacks.

He met my challenge head on. Laser fire slammed into my shields. I was betting I could hit the unshielded interceptor before my shields evaporated. He couldn't withstand a direct strike. One of my shots slashed across his dagger-like wing, forcing him to alter course and shoot wide. I instantly broke my roll and blasted him with everything I had. Momentum took me through the exploding fireball.

"Hey Dex, wrong again!" I yelled into my comm, "Say hello to our squadron's latest ace!"

The Imperial carrier exploded, lighting up every surviving ship in the area.

"That's great, Five." Dex responded, "But say hello to our first capital ship ace. Let's see you top that one!"

I turned my ship towards Blue Six and sighed. Clearly, I still had a long way to go.

Onslaught At Arda I

Sector 42 all clear," crackled over the comm. "Moving on to Sector 43."

"Roger that, Vortex 6. I'm gonna buzz the canyon in Sector 17 before returning to base. Vortex 4 out." Banking his airspeeder to the left, Jerrod Lourdas dropped down into the deep, rouge canyon below. They'd dubbed it Torrence Run in honor of Vortex Squadron's infamous leader, Rik Torrence, and no one could pilot the Run's terrifying twists and turns better.

Sweeping through the trench and around rocky outcroppings, Jerrod raised his craft above the opening to swing back towards another gorge known only as the Gauntlet.

"Arda Base, this is Vortex 4 returning from patrol. All clear as usual. Ready for access sequence."

"Thank you, Vortex 4, initiating computer auto-guidance now," came the static reply. The cliffs and gorges scrambled most comm systems, and it had taken the Alliance months to perfect transmissions in the area.

Relaxing on his controls, Jerrod let Command and Control slave the vehicle to guide it through the dangerous twists and turns of the Gauntlet. Only the most skilled pilots could navigate the tight spaces of the canyon leading towards the Alliance hangar bay, adding another layer of protection to the base against enemy fighters.

His ship touched down in the hangar and Jerrod released his harness to begin his post-flight check. On the ground, technicians hurried to connect refueling lines and give the speeder a once-over, making sure it was ready to fly again at a moment's notice.

As he climbed down from his weathered and battered speeder, Jerrod saw Captain Harl Bess approaching. The base's chief of operations for all of its spacecraft and speeders called out, "Lourdass, anything out there?"

Jumping from the last step of the speeder's ladder, Jerrod handed his flight helmet to a waiting tech and smiled at the captain. "Just rocks and lizards, sir. Same as the last five days. I was almost hoping to run into some flyers just to fit in some target practice."

"Don't get cocky, kid. You never know when an Imperial patrol could target this world or send some probe droid to go poking around. Better pilots than you have let down their guard and paid with their lives."

"Just kidding with you, sir. I understand."

Bess gave Jerrod a stern look before pivoting to bark orders to another group prepping their ships in the massive hangar. Turning to head to the barracks, Jerrod nearly tripped over Var Narek, field assistant to Setenna Hase, one of the base's ranking commanders.

"Sorry, sir, didn't see you there. Something I can do for you?" Jerrod asked.

Var Narek was a stickler for detail when carrying out Setenna's orders, which rubbed Jerrod and many of the lower-ranking Alliance soldiers

the wrong way. Especially since his interpretation of the rules kept growing, it seemed.

"Lieutenant Lourdas, your flight path was not cleared to sweep Sector 17, and in doing so you left Sector 7 un-scanned. How do you know that you didn't miss something vital with this breach of protocol?"

"I'm sure the rocks and lizards won't mind. Besides, long range scanners showed no signs of any movement or activity anywhere out there," the lieutenant replied, waving his hand dismissively.

"I'm sure you know that sensors are unreliable throughout this entire area. Be sure you follow the prescribed flight paths, or you will find yourself removed from flight duty altogether."

Jerrod saluted ironically as the uptight commander stormed off. He'd like to see the lanky slicer try to go out there day after day, week after week, with nothing to break up the monotony. The pilot shrugged and headed to the habitat for a much-needed cold shower.

Jerrod stepped out of the offices and into the artificially lit corridors. According to his chrono it was nearly midnight; the game had stretched on for hours before the sabacc pot was won. Patting his winnings in his vest pocket, he cut across the hangar bay on his way to the barracks.

The lights in the hangar were dim to conserve the generators' power. He swore as he tripped on a cable stretched across the ground, followed by a distant clatter.

"Someone there?" he called out, freezing in place, his hand slowly going towards his holdout blaster.

From behind a rock column, Var Narek emerged, a datapad in his hands. "Oh, hello, Lourdas. What brings you out so late?"

"I was just heading back to my quarters. What are you doing back here?" Jerrod asked.

"Finishing some last minute checks of the maintenance logs. Setenna wants to make sure everything is squared away for tomorrow's mission."

"I hadn't heard about that..." Jerrod trailed off.

"I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sure you'll be briefed tomorrow," Var said quickly. "Well, it looks like I'm finished here. You should probably get some rest, too." It was less of a suggestion and more of an order.

"Yeah," the pilot nodded. "Probably."

Var followed him back to the habitat in silence, wishing him a good night when the hallway to the officer's quarters branched off. Jerrod had a bad feeling but couldn't put his finger on what it was.

Behind them in the hangar, a black metallic device lay carefully hidden by debris, sand, and rocks. A sequence of red and blue lights pulsed on top of the box over... and over...

Lords Of Nal Hutta

Why can't anything ever be easy?"

Gorran snorted in agreement. The Gank sighted the scope calmly, oblivious to the chaos around them. Acrid smoke from the blaster impacts on the walls to either side of the pair stank of burning metal.

"These guys are dead-set on making sure our Sakiyan friend gets away, aren't they?" Nell asked his partner. Peeking around the edge of the wall, the scrawny human smuggler quickly pulled his head back as another round of bolts rang out.

Gently squeezing the trigger, Gorran let a blast fly. The shot hit dead-on, dropping an unfortunate Klatoonian who had stepped out from cover to return fire. The Gank chuckled, a grating, digitized sound that always made Nell smile. Looking at the bounty hunter standing next to him, Nell felt almost invincible—a rare feeling on Nar Shaddaa.

Slowly, the sounds of air recyclers, transports passing overhead, and the usual hustle and bustle of the Smuggler's Moon replaced the shriek of blaster fire that had filled the street moments earlier.

Gorran's voice hissed out. "We should advance on their position. The way appears to be clear."

Skulking from building to building, the hunters pressed ahead, weapons at the ready. Overturned trash canisters and hastily pulled down billboards were the only remnants of the rival hunters' improvised fortifications down the side alley.

Gorran extended an arm, servos whirring furiously inside. From within the circuitry, a scanner extended, bathing the vicinity in invisible particles that swam through the air searching for a trace of the quarry.

"Anything?" Nell prodded his partner. "If Giarda's thugs get to Razall first, we are definitely done for." Clan Gorensla had an enormous bounty on the Sakiyan's head, big enough to pay Gorran's and Nell's debts twice over. Giarda and her clan, the Jiramma, had offered no such reward. The secrets the Sakiyan had stolen were far too dangerous to risk on bounty hunters, and Gorensla would pay handsomely to get them.

The readout on the Gank's scans showed residual energy traces, remnants of the recent battle that were dissipating. No other life forms appeared nearby.

"I believe we must proceed through the alley. The trackers must have gone through there."

"You're the expert. Lead the way." A strong sense of unease settled over Nell, a vibe he couldn't shake. He kept the feeling to himself, knowing the stakes were too high to let the jitters halt their path.

The pair rounded another corner to find a wall of blaster rifles leveled at them. Behind the thugs, a corpulent, brown gastropod lounged on a repulsorsled, absentmindedly studying her fingers.

A deep booming voice echoed through the alley. *"Been a while, my friends. You haven't been avoiding me, have you?"* The throaty, Huttese words sent a chill up Nell's spine. The Hutt's smile was entirely menacing.

"H-hey, G-Giarda," the human stammered. "We haven't been avoiding anyone. Just b-busy, you know."

"Busy looking for a certain Sakiyan, I see." Giarda's tone took a harder edge, all pretense of friendliness gone. *"That traitor's hide belongs to me and me alone. I will not stand to see him turned over to Gorensla scum!"* Even the usually unflappable Gorran flinched.

Nell's mind raced. There was a way out of this, he was sure. He felt a small bead of sweat drip down his face.

"Giarda, I have a proposal for you," Nell said suddenly. Gorran gave him a sidelong look through an impassive lens. "We know there were disappointments in our past dealings. If you allow us to capture Razall, we'll deliver him to you, alive, and for free. All we ask is that you wipe our slate clean. It's win-win!"

The Hutt studied the human, seemingly impressed by this brash proposal. Violence hung in the air.

"You have one day to find him. After that, all deals are off." The Hutt's bodyguards lowered their weapons. "Let's give these professionals space to work."

As the alley cleared, Gorran turned to Nell, head cocked quizzically. The smuggler lowered his voice. "If we turn him over to Giarda, we can clear our names with the Hutt. Before turning him over though, we could copy the files and sell those to the Gorensla."

The Gank nodded, considering the smuggler's plan.

As the doors closed behind the human and Gank bounty hunters, Giarda glared down from the throne at the chained individual before her. Her deep laughter was soon joined by the cackles of her minions.

"Release him."

The Sakiyan calmly rubbed his wrists as the chains were removed and casually bowed before the Hutt. "I take it all went as planned?"

Giarda's laughter echoed again. *"Indeed, my friend. The Gorensla have the false information, Gorran and Nell are back under my thumb. Within the clan, all will tell of Giarda bringing a traitor down before even Noako could reach him! In all, a very profitable day."*

Razall raised a drink. "To Giarda, master manipulator."

The Sakiyan downed his cup as Giarda gloated on. Another day on Nar Shaddaa, the scoundrel thought. Another day of Hutt schemes within schemes. "I guess I should make myself scarce to complete this ruse."

Razall did not even feel the blade that took his life. *"I shall take care of that for you, my dear Razall. You have already had such a trying few days..."*

Fly Casual

Bombed out again," I said, watching the human captain's reaction. He smiled indulgently and looked back to his cards. Across the cantina's scuffed game table, Bulsar wore his usual sabacc face. It always appeared cocky to me, but humans don't hide emotions well. Not that Bulsar liked to hide, as his garish shirt attested.

"Where's that blasted droid?" someone muttered.

Captain Malrik's men, three burly humans who smelled worse than tauntauns, grew impatient. Their glasses had been standing empty for almost a full sabacc round.

"Go get the drinks yourself," Malrik told the crewman sternly. "You're out anyway." His glass was empty too. I put my green hand on Malrik's brown one and gave it a squeeze while I watched his man rise out of the corner of my eye. My companion's crew was a crude lot, and I worried he might make trouble at the counter.

"Ha!" Bulsar slapped his cards onto the table where the interference field would keep them from shifting. An idiot's array. How appropriate.

"He's cheating," Malrik growled. "Search him!"

Bulsar threw up his hands, his eyes on me. Like I was going to save him. He would blow our operation if he didn't lose a round or two. The crew members grabbed an arm each and hauled him upright. As they searched, I turned to check on the crewman at the bar. He argued with a Gran. Blast Bulsar for distracting me.

"Excuse me," I said, brushing my hand across Malrik's shoulders as I rose. "I'll be right back."

I was too late. He shouted about credits owed, boasting about the cargo. Soon all the low-life scum in this place would want a piece of it, or sell Malrik out to the Hutt he stole it from. I wasn't going to wait to see which happened first; I'd get to the ship.

"Going somewhere?" Malrik asked warily.

"Of course not," I said, irked that he had followed me. Didn't he trust me? Weren't the pheromones working?

I glanced meaningfully at the arguing crewman. A crowd tightened around him, and a couple of humans glanced our way. If any of them figured out that Malrik's cargo was the same spice an angry, vengeful Hutt had recently "lost," we were all in trouble.

"I need to get to the ship," Malrik said. "You coming?"

I nodded. He turned to motion his men to follow us just as a Wookiee grabbed the loud-mouthed crewman at the counter with a roar. Someone fired a blaster and hit the Gran, who crashed into a table, drawing more drinkers into the fray. The droid behind the counter ducked down as more weapons appeared and chaos erupted.

We ran for the exit. I swiped someone's pistol as I pushed past, just in case. A shout thundered behind us, and Malrik grabbed my hand to hurry me along the corridor.

Blasts followed us as we rounded the corner. I tried to turn to face the pursuers, but Malrik pulled me on into the docking bay. The hangar looked empty, and I relaxed a fraction as Malrik's thugs locked the door. Then I saw the familiar shape of a Quarren in an overcoat coming down the boarding ramp. He clutched a blaster in each hand.

"Who do you think you are?" Malrik snapped, pointing his pistol at the intruder's tentacled head. The Quarren was quick. He raised his blasters and fired, and I turned to see the crew behind us fall before Malrik took his shot. The Quarren dropped on his knees as if to give Malrik another shot. Such bravado.

I slipped a hand into the shock glove in my pocket and slapped it onto the back of Malrik's head, forcing him down to the floor as he writhed in my grip.

"Let him live, Netek," I said. "Let him take some of the heat. You got the spice?"

"Not as much as you said. He sold some already?"

"I never saw it. Guess he exaggerated."

A hiss came from the hangar door behind me; someone persistent on the other side pried it open with furry paws. I drew my pilfered pistol, and Netek raised his blasters.

"How many?" he asked.

"No idea."

"Well, put that thing away. I've got it."

I rolled my eyes, but he was intent on the door—it burst wide and released a Wookiee and two hairy humans into the hangar. None of them had the chance to fire a shot before Netek gunned them down.

"Come on," I said. "We'd better get rid of the stuff as soon as we can."

We turned our backs on the bulk of the transport ship and headed to the next docking bay where our own familiar freighter waited, sidestepping the fallen bodies on the way. Netek looked grumpy; not enough of a challenge for him. Some people are hard to please.

Bulsar sat in the hold counting credit chips on top of a crate. He didn't look up.

"Thought I'd take the lot," he grumbled. "I'd have won it all anyway."

"You were supposed to keep them playing," I said. "What happened to the plan?"

"And was the fight part of the plan, too? You were supposed to keep them happy."

"The job's not over yet," Netek said. "Let's go."

Desperate Allies

So, this is what you call hospitality then, Ambassador Kaza?" Ileris Tik'kla looked across the table at the aged Gossam. The Caamasi's indignation hung heavy in the air. Niak, her Neimoidian assistant, fidgeted nervously behind her.

"No, old friend, I'm afraid this is what I call necessity." Woz Kaza let out a heavy sigh. "Betraying you to the Empire wasn't part of my plan. But I'm not an ambassador any more, and neither are you. The Senate is gone, and drastic contingencies are required. It's part of the job, you know, the ugly side of politics. Now then, would you like me to call for caff while we wait?" The Gossam motioned absently, and an aide slipped past the armed guards with a furtive glance.

"How courteous of you."

"Of course. I might have had a change in career, but we aren't barbarians." The Gossam accepted a steaming mug from the attendant and placed it before Ileris. Woz took the second cup for himself, looking into it and stirring contemplatively.

"So, how is your family, Woz?"

The Gossam's eyes flicked up from the cup for an instant. "Well, of course. Far from all of this... unpleasant upheaval. Very kind of you to ask."

"And how is your career? Your new associates in the covert freight industry must be nervous about you consorting with the Empire like this."

"Oh, worst-case scenario, I can always bribe them. Smugglers and politicians are similar that way."

"You're not going to give us up to the Empire, Woz." The Caamasi picked up her mug and drank, gazing over the rim dispassionately.

"And there you go, dampening a perfectly good conversation. Very well, I'll play along. Why not?"

"Because my people are reliable. Niak, how many guards does Ambassador Kaza have in this facility?"

The young Neimoidian started slightly upon hearing her name before regaining her composure. "Oh! Um, eighteen, Ambassador. Plus the droids in the bay."

"That's a nice trick, Ileris. Your aide must be popular at parties."

"Not my aide, my analyst," the Caamasi stated factually. "And how much does our arms dealer friend pay for enforcers, in total, Niak?"

"Four hundred and seventy-eight thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight credits yearly. Plus various benefits." The Neimoidian smiled nervously.

The Gossam sighed. "You know that I have no idea if that's exactly right or not, don't you?"

Ileris turned back to him. "I do. What matters is that I know it's correct. Because my people are reliable."

The Gossam stepped back from the table and turned, limping slightly and leaning on his cane. "What point are you trying to make with all of this?"

"Niak, kindly enlighten him. Succinctly, please."

The Neimoidian hesitated, collecting her words for a moment. "Based on analysis of the fiscal structure of your organization, projections of the disruption that calling the Empire to collect us will cause to your business, and the limited value of the Imperial bounty on the Ambassador, your expected losses from cooperating with the Empire are higher than the cost of fleeing and relocating your operation. It's only logical for you to betray us if the Empire is threatening something other than a financial asset—your family."

"Thank you. In light of that information, Woz, let me inform you: the Empire poses no threat to your family. At least, not unless they take us alive." The Caamasi placed her mug on the table with a click.

The Gossam's cane slipped from his grip but he caught it before it could hit the ground. "What?"

"Their cruiser had to alter its route due to a hyperdrive malfunction... oh, eight hours ago."

"Ten hours ago, ma'am!" Niak chirped.

"Ten hours ago. Thank you, Niak. It will have been diverted through Brentaal by now, then on to its final destination. I know that's not where you wanted to send them, but I assure you, it's safer than Ixtiar. I expect that the Imperial forces waiting for them to arrive on Anaxes will have gotten rather confused by now, but they are half a galaxy away at this point. By the time they find the modified flight records, your family will be underground, safe. Even I won't know where they are. Unless, of course, the Imperials coerce the answer out of a prisoner in the next few hours. I very much doubt that I could stand up to torture for that long."

"Wha-what do you expect me to do? I can't just—"

"We are going to walk out of here, and then you will spin the Imperials some tale of how we escaped. I don't really care what you tell them, so long as it isn't true. I leave the lying in your capable hands." The Caamasi's eyes held no malice and no mercy.

The Gossam struggled for a moment, then regained his composure. "And here I thought you trusted me."

"I do trust you. I trust you to behave exactly as I've described. I even trust that next time the Rebel Alliance wishes to purchase arms, you'll deal in good faith. After all, you owe me a debt now." Ileris stood and moved to the door, and Niak followed her.

"A debt? This is blackmail, Ileris!"

The Caamasi sighed and turned. For an instant, her eyes were very tired. "Sometimes, Woz, drastic contingencies are required."

One Shot First

"Psst... hey, Faxn, did you hear what Moolik said? About the ghest?"

Faxn rolled his eyes. Yes, he'd heard Moolik. He'd heard nothing but Moolik since the group started their hunt. "My father killed a ghest out here once," he'd say, "It must have been twice the size of a person and three times as deadly." Faxn was tired of Moolik's crowing, but since it was Moolik's family that was sponsoring their First Hunt, he couldn't very well afford to be too disrespectful.

"Faxn, hey... are you all there?"

"Yes, sure, sorry Deech, lost in thought there for a second. Yes, I heard Moolik's tale."

"Do you think it's true? Do you think there's really ghests out here?"

Faxn, Deech, Moolik, and the rest of the Rodian youths of the Sovam clan were deep in the swamps on their First Hunt, the first chance any of them would have to show their stalking and hunting skills away from the elders of the clan. They were expected to bring back a trophy of their victory, and they'd been tracking a karstag for three days, a promising quarry.

The chances of seeing something as rare or as dangerous as a ghest were impossibly low, and it was just as well, because if this group ran into a ghest, they'd probably never make it back.

"No, Deech, I'm sure he's just polishing his spines. Ghests haven't been seen in this area for a hundred years, and besides, he never said he'd seen one recently. He's as green as the rest of us."

Abruptly, the group fell silent. Moolik, standing at the head of the group, raised two fingers and pointed off to the left. That was the signal; they should be getting close to the karstag.

Two of the group broke off and headed off in the direction of Moolik's gesture, moving to corral the karstag into a trap that would be set by the rest of the group.

"Of course it would happen now," Faxn thought. "Right when Moolik's at point."

"Moolik's never going to let it go that he led us in the capture of our first trophy."

The sound of muffled shouts and blaster fire rang out through the brush.

"That's odd," wondered Faxn, "they were only supposed to spook the karstag, not..."

He never had time to finish his thought, as a massive blur of teeth and claw burst into the clearing from beneath the murky waters, tearing into one of the young Rodians before he could even scream and dragging him back underwater.

The hunting party lost all semblance of unity as Moolik screamed, "Run! Ghest!" and the Rodians scattered in every direction.

"Faxn, come quick!" Deech shouted, grabbing the arm of his friend, but he wouldn't move.

"Deech, don't move," Faxn whispered, but they knew it was futile. Deech, too, saw the ghest's eyes peeking out from the water right in front of him, staring at them intently. Faxn brushed the blaster at his hip, knowing there was no way he could be fast enough.

The ghest leapt as Faxn and Deech both made their moves.

Faxn's shot went wide and late. "Deech, no!" he cried, as the ghest pounced on top of Deech before he could even fire a shot.

The six-meter-long beast sat on top of Deech while Faxn wondered when it would be his turn. As the ghest slowly rose, Faxn stood paralyzed by fear.

And then the ghest flopped over onto its back, a wounded-but-still-alive Deech heaving it up.

"...Deech! You're alive! How?" Faxn exulted. Deech smiled meekly and flipped his blaster up. "Lucky shot, I guess. I suppose I'm a real hunter, now."

"Yeah, I'd think so," Faxn chuckled to himself. "We got our quarry, and there's no way Moolik's taking credit for this one."

"Just back from GlitterFall, huh? Well, I've got just the place to thaw you out: Dalgeer's Rim. You'll like it. It's warm, rocky, has plenty of space, and a wide-open approach. Now, here's your breath mask. Don't worry, it's only a precaution. Sometimes the volcano surprises them a bit. What? Yes, I said volcano. The base is built into the rim. Don't worry, it's not *too* active in the base's area. It's a lot more exciting in the adjoining caldera, believe me. Now, if we can get on with this...."

—Overheard comment from an Alliance sergeant.

To: Mon Mothma, Chief of State

From: Arhul Hextrophon, Executive Secretary and Master Historian, Alliance High Command

Security Status: Top Secret

Regarding: Report on Growth, Organization, Equipment, Activities and Objectives of the Rebellion.

Mon Mothma:

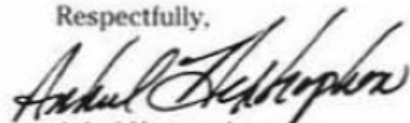
My office has completed the report you commissioned, compiling all known information concerning the Rebel Alliance from its earliest beginnings. In its entirety, the report is 168,000 DSUs in length and takes over 700 hours to read (assuming a rather high reading rate of one data screen unit per 15 seconds). Therefore, because we will be using the material to organize a briefing manual for incoming officers of the Alliance, I asked my most trusted assistant, Voren Na'al, to prepare a condensed summary of the report, which can be read in a much shorter time. I send you now the summary; if you wish a copy of the expanded version, one will of course be sent to you immediately.

Several notes concerning the report:

- The first section, concerning the birth and growth of the Alliance, is somewhat sketchy and incomplete. Due to the number of losses we suffered when Alderaan was destroyed, and the fact that you are one of the only people who has been with the Alliance since the beginning, we only had a small pool of sources to interview for background information. However, the intelligence and underground networks section is better documented.
- The remainder of the report, examining the military structure, vehicles, troop types, support services and recruitment and training of the Rebellion, is concise and complete. My researchers have spent thousands of hours inspecting first-hand reports from Alliance Army, Navy and Intelligence personnel to come up with the information contained herein.

In Conclusion: Considering the short time allotted for the creation of this report and the difficulty of contacting primary sources without lifting the veil of secrecy, our committee has done an exceptional job. Voren Na'al is a fine historian and I am sure the material contained in this report will be satisfactory for your needs.

Respectfully,


Arhul Hextrophon

*In the grave of Alderaan,
In the night of Charentoth,
In the sands of Tatooine,
And the bloody hell of Hoth.*

*We will meet the enemy;
We will sound the battle-cry.
With our comrades at our sides,
We will fight and we will die.*

*Though they hunt us across space;
Though they kill us by the scores.
Though they crush our blessed home;
Though the mighty Death Star roars.*

*We will meet the enemy;
We will sound the battle-cry.
With our comrades at our sides;
We will fight and they will die.*

— Battle Chant of the
Legion of Alderaan.

Extract of Minutes from the 251st Meeting of the Alliance High Command

Chief of Staff: In reference to the discussion last week on the "Cobolt Offensive," StarCom: anything to report?

Chief of Starfighter Command: A conditional yes. We've got two wings of X- and Y-wings available during that time; Fleet Ops can give us another one; Sector Command says they can scrape up two more —

Chief of Sector Command: Probably. We've got the fighters who survived the Tocan system disaster recuperating in Ghorman; they'll be maybe 75% effective in two weeks. Plus, we can strip Tierfon, Homon and Farstey for the other wing, if the Imps hold off on their offensive in that region.

Chief of Staff: Intell?

Chief of Intelligence: According to my operatives, the Tierfon Sector Fleet isn't planning to launch their attack for three weeks — they too need to rest and refit after Tocan — but the new Fleet Admiral Tzenkens is supposedly a real firebrand: he might push the thing ahead to keep us hopping. I'd say there's maybe a 70% chance we've got our three weeks.

Seeing what we stand to gain — the new Imperial Scandoc decoding computer — 70% is good enough to go on ...

Starfighter Command: A week isn't much time to pull off Cobolt and then get set to parry whatever Tzenkens is up to ...

Support Services: If Fleet gives their approval, we can give you a couple of extra repair ships to hurry things along ...

Fleet: I see no problem there. We've got fleet maneuvers scheduled for that time; we can just cut down on starfighter operations until the repair ships get back.

Chief of Staff: OaS?

Chief of Ordnance and Supply: Fuel and weaponry are already assigned; awaiting pickup in deep space caches in Reegian system. Support has given us the necessary transports.

Chief of Staff: Good. Spec Forces?

General Madine, Special Forces Command: We've set up the liaison group with Sector Command; we're just waiting for up-to-date maps of the base from Intell. It's a risky operation and murder if we mess up, but I'm willing to take the shot if Starfighter Command is.

Chief of Staff: Anyone have anything to add? That's it, then. General Madine will take control of planning and operation of Cobolt from this point on. You will all assign officers to Madine's task force. General, I want daily progress reports.

General Madine: Yes sir.

Commander-in-Chief: Nicely done, gentlebeings. Chief of Staff, what is the next subject on the agenda?

Flashpoint! Brak Sector

INVISIBLE NEWS STACK

Everywhere They Don't Want Us To Be ...

Bacrana Shipyards Half Completed

Just when you thought they couldn't cram another ship into the Bacrana system, they have. The first section of the Bacrana Naval Shipyards went into service this month. If you thought Imperial Customs was bad before, you might as well give up now. Best have those permits ready ahead of time or half the Imperial Navy will be waiting for you ...

Another Big Blast

We've all heard stories about Alderaan being destroyed by the Empire's new super weapon, the Death Star. Now it seems the destructor has become the destructee. In completely unofficial reports, the Rebellion has spread the word that they've blown it up ... with one shot from a starfighter no less. Either that pilot is amazing or this is one gutsy propaganda campaign. We'll keep you posted.

Bit Quiet 'Round Here ...

Speaking of the fun-loving Rebel Alliance, what's going on around here? First there's scattered reports of Rebel activity in Brak sector. Then, as if to prove a point, the Rebels knock out the sector comm-net for a few hours. Okay, now that we know you're out there ... nothing more happens. Not a thing for most of a year. Is this a Rebellion or did you just not like last year's new vids?

LMC Closings

More good news from the home office ... LMC's closed another mine. Just a small one. Only 2,000 folks out of work this time and its way out in the Welsi system. (We didn't even know there was a Welsi system!) Looks like that "economic recovery" is well underway.

In a related story, LMC has announced that it's headquarters world of Demar is now off-limits to those beings who are under "work stasis." That means "no more hand-outs and stay off our planet, thank you." Apparently, LMC thinks you dirty up the place and are bad for their image (as though it could get any worse).

No Gang War Anymore?

Good news for those of you who frequent Genesis. No more ducking for cover in the starport or checking your speeder for explosives. Kirat and Soach have supposedly called a truce! Apparently, the crimelords will only shoot at each other in private from now on. Also, they request any bounty hunters not already in their employ to please apply immediately. For the gambling types, official odds are 20-to-1 against the truce lasting more than six months.

Aramandi Reject LMC Again

For the fifteenth (or is that sixteenth?) time this year, the Aramandi have rejected LMC's request and proposal to begin mining operations in the Aramand Cluster. Apparently, LMC can't take a hint. Need we say more?

You're in the Rebellion Now ...

"Squad! Atten...tion! I am Major Berra, but you can call me 'Crazy Man'!

"You have been given to me to turn into fighting beings! That is something which I guarantee I will do! You will run, fight, climb, swim and jump when I say! You will learn discipline! And you will become better soldiers! Whatever you can do, you'll get better at! Whatever you don't know, you'll learn!

"By the end of this session, you'll all hate me. But, I won't take it personally because I know my training will save your hides.

"Because of me, I know you'll make it back for more. The last one to the end of the cavern runs for 30 minutes! Now, **MOVE!**"

Smuggler's Scuttlebutt: Brak Sector

"So, yer int'restid in workin' Brak Sector, are ya? Plenty a' opportunities, there are, if ya don't mind the risks. O' course, if ya did, ya wouldn't be askin', I guess.

"Let's see. Ya might try Kirat's organization. They're the smugglin' heavyweights 'round here. They pay well, and are pretty fair, as such folks go. O'course, ya still gotta watch your back since you'll be in th' middle o'the biggest crime war this sector's ever seen. Never know when Soach's gang'll show up and want their cut. Or eliminate the competition. Or actually get *Jabba's* help.

"Course you could work for Soach instead. Bit riskier, I guess, since he runs most o' the black markets 'round here. He'll be askin' ya to run illegal goods right under the Empire's and the Corp's noses. Eh? Oh, sorry, the 'Corp's' LMC. Better remember that or every fringe runner'll know yer new 'round here. If ya already have dealings with Jabba, ya best talk to Soach. Neither o'them likes their employees workin' for the other side.

"Since you're askin' for advice anyways, I wouldn't even think 'bout double crossin' either of 'em. Way too many hunters in their employ, if ya' understand me. Kirat's said to have pirates workin' for him, too. If ya' make trouble for Soach, the Twi'lek's likely to get some of Jabba's hunters after ya.

"Now, if ya want to stay outta this mess, ya can always poke around on Genesia. There's some small timers still around, even though you'll be at Kirat's center o' operations. Lotsa short runs to Laut and Gimm, too.

"Whatever ya do, stay away from the Empire's fleet systems. It's hard enough to work this sector anyways, with the whole fleet movin' through. It don't do no good to stir 'em up by tryin' to smuggle goods to restricted planets. You'll end up in the Tarok Hole or dead and you'll make life that much worse for th' rest o' us. It's bad enough we got th' blasted Rebels blowin' up half th' sector ..."

Commander Dara Gion entered the crowded Oracle Base common room. No one looked up from their meals to see who had entered: the soldiers looked weary and tired and weren't about to let anyone interfere with their chance to eat or swap stories. An SE4 servant droid vainly tried to clean up around the Rebel veterans at the battered dining tables. Near the center of the room, several Sullustan troopers lounged about on the ragged ship's couches in the slightly more comfortable "living area." A few others passed the time at an ancient sabacc table in the dimly lit back corner.

Better enjoy the quiet while they can, Dara thought.

Looking around the room, she easily picked out some of the others. In one corner, most of the new recruits sat in rapt attention as Mission Group operatives gestured wildly and strained to be heard above the clamor.

No doubt bragging about themselves. Show offs, Dara thought. Then she glanced down the line of people. *Most of them are Humans this time.*

Near the main entry, the Ithorian, or "Hammerhead," techs from the Lesser Plooriod Cluster were still fiddling with an R5 droid they had brought along with them. Occasional squawks and squeals from the droid cut through the room.

Sounds like they have more than a "couple" of bugs left in that thing, she observed.

The commander carefully made her way to the center of the room, stepping through the crowd. Once in the middle of the buzzing room, Dara whistled for attention. After a minute, only the hum of the room's struggling air recycler could be heard as everyone turned to face the Commander.

"Hello and welcome to Brak sector. I am Commander Dara Gion, Personnel Officer of this base. In light of the number of new personnel in the sector, we decided to hold these informal briefing sessions to give you some quick information about your surroundings. You will receive more detailed data as is necessary for your missions. Of course, you are encouraged to learn as much as you can about the local area and population."

Dara looked around the room. "First, a few facts. Brak sector is located on the outer edge of the Expansion Region, about 20 light years away from the Corellian Run

Trade Route on The Slice. We're a sidestep, astrographically speaking, from important Imperial military and trade lanes. The sector officially contains 67 inhabited and over 350 uninhabited star systems, but we figure small colonies and other unofficial operations bring the number of inhabited systems to around 90."

"The majority of beings within the sector are Humans, although there are significant alien populations on some planets. Brak sector is also home to the Aramandi, the only 'local' sapient species. Unless you are stationed in the Aramand Cluster you probably won't see them very often. Those you do see are usually outcasts; the Aramandi are mostly isolationists.

"Now, something about the local Alliance sector forces. For security reasons, I can't relay the size of our forces in the sector. I can tell you that you are part of a substantial build up — far greater than we ever expected. Our group has been fighting for nearly a year on its own—that is, without help from the Alliance. General Trep Reskan, sector commander-in-chief, knows the politics and military procedures of this sector. Brak sector is our home, so show a little respect. Don't let his relaxed manner fool you. He knows what he's doing."

"Two things make this sector important to the Alliance. One is the Imperial Navy. The other is Lant Mining Corporation. We are in a sector that sees more Imperial fleet traffic in a day than most see in a year. Many major operations in the outer regions begin in or around this sector. The Navy has a half-completed shipyard in the Bacrana system — it's very well defended. Once finished, they will be able to service anything up to an Imperial Star Destroyer. That will make life a lot tougher here and in nearby sectors. Hopefully, we can keep that day from coming too soon."

Dara stopped as a young Human from one of the Mission Groups raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"When do we hit them?" The anticipation on the kid's face was dangerous. He obviously didn't know what he was asking for.

Dara sighed, thinking, *There's always one of them.*

"We don't. At least not directly. Since the shipyards are located in the Bacrana system, they are the most heavily defended target in the sector. The system is also

one of the four fleet staging areas, and the home to the sector capital city of Amma on Bacrana itself. Even the Alliance fleet would have trouble cracking this system. We don't have that kind of firepower.

"What we can do is hit them where they aren't well defended. This brings me to our second target, Lant Mining Corporation, or 'LMC' as the locals call it. LMC is a major supplier of metals and minerals to the Empire's war industries. The company has contracts with Sienar Fleet Systems, Kuat Drive Yards and Merr-Sonn, to name a few. LMC also sends repair materials directly to the Bacrana Shipyards. We can attack its convoys and processing facilities. We hope to drastically reduce its aid to the Empire."

Dara began pacing the center of the room. "Unfortunately, LMC is also Brak sector's main employer. The corporation is so intertwined with the sector's economy that it's difficult to separate the two. Right now, LMC is suffering through an economic crisis. Seems its reserves are running out, which is good news for us.

"The problem is, when LMC sneezes, Brak sector gets sick. Anything we do to LMC is likely to have substantial repercussions. We figure that any attacks against the company will be explained to the citizenry as terrorism, turning popular opinion against the Rebellion. We can't afford to level these facilities. Our reputation would suffer greatly, and innocent bystanders would be killed or hurt — not to mention the economic impact. These days, losing your job is almost a death sentence on some worlds. We must be very careful."

A middle aged woman spoke up from the front of the room, "Are their employees likely to join us?"

Dara stopped pacing. "Probably not. Right now most of them are desperately trying to keep their jobs. LMC has been closing operations all over the sector. You may have already seen some of the unemployed out on the streets. Still, there are a few who might. It isn't hopeless to try. Are there any other questions? You'll be getting specific information about your assignments from your duty officers or COs."

A two-voiced question came from the doorway. "What about criminal elements? Are they significant?" asked an Ithorian tech.

Dara turned to the Ithorian. "In some areas. If you are operating in the Genesia system, they certainly are. You will all soon hear about the on-again, off-again gang war between the sector's largest crimeboss, Eelien Kirat, and Jabba the Hutt's local underling, Soach the Twi'lek. We try to stay out of their way as much as possible given the attention they attract."

"That should about do it for now. If you have any further questions about Brak sector, ask anyone from the area. Datapad reports are also available, as well as local histories. New recruits, if you'll follow me, you've got an appointment with Major Berra for training."

A loud whistle came from one of the techs. "May the Force be with you. You're gonna need it," he said to the departing newcomers.

Life in the Field

"We're ready for the next one, Captain," said a voice over the intercom.

Stretching her real arm, Captain Niree looked over to the sensor station, "Got another one lined up yet? Time's money, you know."

The young Human technician looked up, "There's one in range now. The profile is on your screen."

Niree glanced down at her terminal, "It's too big." She tapped a button on the panel. "Fire control, time to earn your pay. Coordinate with tractor control and fire when ready."

A few minutes later, red flashes of laser fire erupted from the bow of *The Pulverizer*. After several salvos, the rock began to crack and disintegrate. Suddenly, a large, single explosion erupted from the asteroid, sending starfighter-sized chunks in all directions.

"Evasive!" yelled Niree as one of the high speed chunks came hurtling towards her ship.

"Not enough time! Brace for impact!" screamed

the helmsman.

Midway on its collision course, the asteroid suddenly shifted trajectory, tumbling close by the ship. The technician looked at his screen in disbelief, but the Captain Niree smiled knowingly as the asteroid made a sharp turn and entered the ship's intake chute.

The Captain tapped her comm panel with her artificial arm, "Nice catch, Hema. Your crew gets a bonus for that one."

Niree looked back out at the shattered rock ahead of her, thinking of a time when she wasn't so lucky. She involuntarily glanced at her arm. Shaking off the memory, Niree looked at the white faced technician, "Mister Rikap, another blown reading like that, and you'll be finding yourself another job. If you'd like to stay, please find us a rock without trapped explosive gasses. We're just lucky we didn't get that one inside before finding out."



Rebel Alliance Special Operations

Mission Groups Briefing

Brak Sector

(Transcript from General Reskan's datafiles)

"Okay troops, welcome to Brak sector. As you know, I'm General Trep Reskan, C-in-C of Brak Sector Command. I know you've already had the basic intro, so we'll skip that. We're here to talk about your job.

"Simply put, you'll go where we need you to go and do what we need you to do. As long as you get the job done without killing yourselves or giving us away, the specifics are up to you.

"Screw up and we'll have you working the deep space listening posts by yourselves for a few months. Do well and we'll defeat the Empire that much sooner.

"Now, I'm sure you've all got your own contacts in this sector, but let me add a couple of ours. These people are only to be contacted when absolutely necessary. They can help in a pinch, but they can't bail you out of every little scuffle. If you can't handle your own problems, you shouldn't be in Special Ops.

"First, there's one of our fronts called StarLiners. It's a small passenger and tourist shuttle line. We use it mostly for moving our people about, especially if they need to be watched or have help nearby. Be careful who you talk to: only a few of the employees are Rebels and most passengers are loyal Imperial citizens. If you need special arrangements, contact one of the ship captains or the owner, Fae Kalena. You'll be given counter signs and codes later.

"The other front is Plu Makor's ship repair shop on G-Station Seven in orbit around Genesia. If you need help with your ship, that's the place to go. We can patch you up here at Oracle Base, but Makor's place is much better at upgrades. If you're stranded somewhere, order his on-site repair service. He'll come to you. Only talk to Makor unless he says otherwise. Oh, and you'll have to pay on the spot. He doesn't take credit.

"Now, things are likely to get boring* in this sector very soon. Since we've got about half the Imperial fleet flying through on a daily basis, this sector's got more 5 and 8 Chicken Alarms than an Emperor's parade. We've got more coops than you'd believe. If you go after every boy in white, duck or birdwatcher you see, you'll be penned, dead or a very dumb orphan. I need 23ers, not vapor ops, so watch that sidethinking!

"Your missions will interesting, mostly one percenters or better. You may go headhunting, take headshots, salt the ether, or maybe set off a few fireworks. Just remember that everything's portable and we could use it all. Also, there's a lot of ABH's around here, so watch it when you hit the Hundred Club.

"If you don't know the Special Ops Slang, think before you shoot — we're outnumbered. And where there aren't Imperials there are bounty hunters. If you do shoot, drop your target and get out while you can. I hope we understand each other. That's all for now. May the Force be with you."

Imperial Report

To: Tilas Magore, Imperial Advisor
From: Moff Lesan Ramier, Brak Sector
Subject: Update

Honored Sir,

It is my pleasure to report that Brak sector remains peaceful at this time. While I am glad for this, it makes me wonder what Reskan's Rebel rabble is up to. The past few weeks have been the most peaceful since their insignificant attacks began. Maybe they gave up their futile struggle.

Our current status is as follows:

Our primary concerns in Brak sector continue to be defensive in nature. Of course, we must protect the Imperial fleet staging areas and Bacrana Shipyards. Any show of weakness would certainly draw the Rebel Alliance's attention.

We must also protect LMC's mines and other essential industries. LMC must continue to supply our shipyards and its military clients without interruption. I am concerned over the apparent vulnerability of many of LMC's facilities, but the company has assured me that their security forces can handle any attacks or sabotage attempts. We shall see.

Sector patrols continue as usual. Abandoned LMC systems are regularly scanned by scout ships, patrol vessels and probots. These areas are just too important to ignore. The discovery of several criminal and pirate bases proves how easily these planets can be converted to hidden bases.

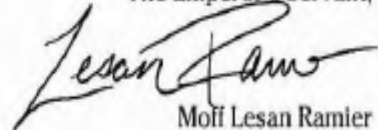
I am increasing the search for Rebel forces and sympathizers despite the recent peace. I have ordered both the ISB and Imperial Intelligence to expand their operations. Few military operations have been carried out so far as all Rebel actions have been hit-and-fade attacks or sabotage. No bases or safe houses have been located. The search for Rebel sympathizers amongst the population and within the planetary governments continues.

I have ordered immediate military action against any Rebel bases or forces that are discovered. Our forces will be able to strike before they can evacuate to another location. I am handling Rebel spies on a case-by-case basis. I hope to locate one to use for misinformation purposes. I intend to use the agent to draw Rebel forces into a trap, and hopefully locate any hidden bases in the process.

As a final note, secret negotiations continue with LMC to open up the Aramand Cluster to mining. I now feel that this move is warranted given LMC's failure to locate other resources. I also feel that the Cluster has been given free reign for far too long. As the situation currently stands, Rebel forces could be operating out of the Cluster, despite the Aramandi's assurances to the contrary.

We are negotiating a combined entry to the Cluster as the Aramandi will certainly resist any attempts to mine or subjugate the area. I will send a detailed report when available.

The Emperor's Servant,



Moff Lesan Ramier

Ambush of Convoy LMC-55c

"Time until rendezvous point?"

"Six minutes, sir."

Six minutes, thought Captain Pricene. Plus another four to the jump point, an hour for the starport delays, the usual 10 or 15 for convoy maneuvering and alignment, five more for course corrections ... over an hour behind schedule, and not even out of the system yet.

Pricene glanced at the rocky debris outside the viewport, then turned back to his navigator. "Erils, those alien fuzzballs at the starport put us off schedule. Must have been the slowest loaders I've ever seen. Any chance of saving time in hyperspace?"

Erils checked her screen. "Yes, but it increases the risk factor by .22 for a total of .35 ..."

"Which exceeds LMC policy and is therefore prohibited," sighed the Captain irritably. He'd heard it a hundred times. "You know, I think some credit-counting bureaucrat made that up to cheat every captain out of their total pay. In my ship we'd never thought twice about ..."

"Ships dropping out of hyperspace, Captain!" interrupted Erils, "A corvette and a dozen fighters! They're moving our way!"

Captain Pricene looked at his screen, "Shields up, even spread, all facings!" He slapped his comm switch, "All ships! Scatter and evade!" Pricene looked back to Erils, "Where's that Imperial escort?"

A fiery explosion lit up the lower half of the viewport. The bridge crew shielded their eyes from the flash.

"That was it, sir," Erils looked up, pale and scared. "Which pirates are strong enough to blast a frigate like that?"

"Those are no pirates! Helm! Get us out of here *now*!" The ship pulled a wide 180 degree turn, accelerating to maximum sublight speed.

"Fighters coming up fast — they're Y-wings!"

The comm system beeped. "Message coming in, sir," announced the communications officer.

"LMC convoy! This is Captain Riane of the Rebel Alliance. Surrender and prepare to be boarded! No harm will come to your crews if you cooperate."

The helmsman turned questioningly to Pricene.

"They're lying! Keep going!" yelled the captain. The ship began to bounce and shake under the blasts of the pursuing Y-wings.

Erils kept her eyes glued to her screen. "Sir, the corvette's got us in range!" The ship rocked beneath Erils as larger blasts all but demolished the freighter's shields. Smoke filled the bridge. "We can't take any more!"

Captain Pricene slapped his comm switch in anger and frustration. "Rebel commander, this is LMC Hauler One-Six! We surrender!" He switched off the circuit and snapped, "Rebel scum. All right, power down everything. Maybe we'll live through this." Pricene gave Erils a worried look. "Well, I guess this is it."

Brak Sector Report to Rebel HQ Sector Command

To: General Natara, Alliance Sector Command

From: General Reskan, Commander-in-Chief, Brak Sector

Regarding: Brak Sector Forces

General Natara,

I extend my warmest thanks to you and your command. When the Alliance promised us supplies and reinforcements, we had no idea of the amount of aid you meant. It is far beyond what I ever hoped for.

We've nearly completed the Sector Headquarters expansion in the Tel system, now codenamed Oracle Base. Sector HQ is fully staffed and we are assigning new personnel to outposts and other bases. One squadron of Y-wings has arrived, and we expect one more Y-wing and one X-wing squadron in a few days.

At the moment, our forces are undergoing extensive training, myself included. The expertise of your instructors is impressive. As proud as I am of my original forces, their new training will make them even more effective. We hope to test their new skills as soon as the build up is finished. I have submitted *Operation: Insignificant* for your approval (see Communique #4722/KUJK).

As requested, I have briefly outlined the primary goals of our forces in Brak sector. We expect that most of these goals will be carried out by covert operations, hit-and-fade attacks, ambushes and other guerrilla warfare tactics. I expect Imperial response to open military action to be swift and devastating given Admiral Trier's tactical expertise and Moff Ramier's fear of losing control over his sector. If we can work on that fear, maybe he'll overreact at the wrong moment.

Our objectives are as follows:

1. Surveillance of Imperial Fleet Staging Areas

Listening posts are already in place in the Bacrana, Rehn, and Skone systems. I'm afraid we must make do with probe droids and scout ships to make regular patrols of the Garia system given the system's lack of suitable hiding spots. We'll pass information up the line as it comes in.

2. Disrupt Imperial Fleet Operations at Strategic Moments

While we want to harass the Imperial Navy as much as possible, I believe that coordinating our attacks with other operations will give the maximum effect. Disruptions will be carried out through commando raids, sabotage, ambushes and other means. Full-scale engagement of Imperial forces will be avoided whenever possible.

3. Delay Ship Repairs at the Bacrana Shipyards

Disrupting the shipyards is an ongoing operation. Because of Bacrana's strong defenses, an open attack on the shipyards is impossible. We plan to attack less defended targets, including supply ships, loading ports, and suppliers. Ideally, we'd like to ambush ships and convoys en route if we can obtain accurate schedules. Intell is working on it. Also, I believe we can safely buy some data from a local specialist called InfoServices. Intell doesn't like it, of course, but we are looking into it anyway.

4. Disrupt LMC Operations, Either at the Source or En Route

Operations against LMC are extremely sensitive. We know that they supply several of the Empire's larger military manufacturers and the Bacrana Shipyards, and this cannot go unstopped. However, attacks on the corporation are bound to be perceived as terrorism, and certainly depicted that way by COMPNOR propaganda.

I still believe LMC is a legitimate target, but we must tailor our operations to avoid civilian casualties. We'll focus on mining, refining and distribution operations.

5. Establish Cell Networks in Major Cities and Planets

Work has already begun on establishing a cell network in Amma on Bacrana. I hope to set up networks on Demar, Genesis and other systems that show underground support of the Rebellion. We need the networks to gather information, increase public support and perform infrequent but effective sabotage raids. Once secure, the networks will also set up front companies and contact companies that may help the Alliance.

6. Procure Supplies, Information, and Other Goods Through Front Companies

Our recent expansion is straining our current supply lines. We need new front companies and other suppliers to purchase goods from the open market. We also need them to transport Rebel operatives. I expect some smaller operations to be manned entirely by Rebel agents. Of course, all companies will have legitimate business to cover Rebel activities.

7. Increase Public Support for the Alliance Within the Sector

Currently, most Brak sector citizens merely tolerate the Empire. After the crackdowns on Bacrana, I think most have accepted the Empire as an unchangeable evolution of the Old Republic. Those who dislike the Empire have, so far, put little faith in the Rebellion. The recent destruction of the Death Star at Yavin has done much to improve our image, but reports associating us with pirates and terrorists are hampering our efforts. We must work to increase our legitimacy, for without public support the Rebellion is doomed to failure.

This is a brief list of our Sector Forces, once all of our reinforcements arrive:

Bases

1 sector headquarters (Oracle Base) with 1 Y-wing squadron
3 starfighter bases (2 Y-wing squadrons, 1 X-wing squadron)
2 backup bases under construction
Numerous "underground" bases

Surveillance Posts

2 Carba Asteroid Belt (Bacrana system)
1 Rehn VII (Rehn system)
1 Skone II (Skone system)
1 Demar (Demar system)

Cell Networks

Amma, Bacrana

Naval Strength

3 Corellian Corvettes
35 light freighters (various types)
36 Y-wing starfighters
12 X-wing starfighters

Again, your help has been outstanding.

Thank you,

General Trep Reskan

Dangerous Business

Ral Nalmar sat back in his desk chair with a smile. "Yes, I completely agree," he said to the gray-skinned man on the vidscreen. "We definitely should take—"
<BEEP! BEEP!>

"Hold on a minute, Eelien," the old man flipped a switch on his desk. "Well, what is it?" he said to the young woman whose face now appeared on the screen.

"We've picked up some airspeeder activity in our vicinity. It may be nothing, but we thought you'd like to know about it."

Ral punched a button on his control panel. The vidscreen divided into two sections, one showing the sensor readings, while the other displayed the woman's face. "Part of that air show in town?" he asked.

"If they are, they're way off. Sir, they've just fired—"

"I see it!" said the old man. The sensors showed multiple missiles coming in from the speeders. "Close up the house! Full defensive measures!"

Ral was halfway down the stairs when the first strike slammed into the Nalmar mansion. Blast after blast rocked the house as droids and people ran for

the bunkers below. Part of the roof came down as the missiles made quick work of the upper levels. Ral had just made it to the main entryway when Soach's enforcers arrived, blasting everything in sight.

What began as an air strike turned into a gritty house battle. Nalmar's people were separated and disoriented by the sneak attack; their defense was insufficient to stop the invaders. The heavily armed enforcers moved through the house, shooting at anything that moved.

With the enforcers just behind him, a badly wounded Ral Nalmar managed to make it down to the bunker, slamming the blast door behind him. His wife was waiting inside. As the lock sealed, he could hear the enforcers making their way down the stairs.

At the bunker's door, the enforcers' chief received a signal. "Everyone outta here! Now!" he yelled into his comlink. The hit men ran from the building at a breakneck pace. Seconds later, another missile strike turned the house into a flaming ruin. Explosions continued as the speeders made additional bombing runs on the remains of the Nalmar family mansion. It was many hours before the fire died down.

Life on Lormar 23

"Hauler 339, you are cleared for docking at Arm One. Shuttle *Mangez IV*, hold your position until Bay Two is clear. Over." Controller Geles rubbed her eyes and looked back at the holo projector. A dozen miniature shuttles and cargo haulers buzzed around the station, like so many bugs circling around a flower.

"Tired, Geles?" asked Lt. Folner from the command console.

"You know I am," said Geles, not turning around. "Gotta transfer off this morning shift." She opened her com channel again. "Freighter *Black Hole*, you are cleared for Docking Arm Three. Over."

"Acknowledged, Control. Over."

"Make that Arm Four, Geles," Folner interrupted.

"Correction *Black Hole*, use Arm Four instead. Over." Geles turned to the command console, "Lieutenant, who's manning Arm Four? I thought it was down for another week."

"A special request from our esteemed commander. A friend of his, I guess. Always gets preferential treatment. It pays not to ask too many questions, Controller."

Geles yawned and stretched in response. Folner glanced up at her, "Must've been some night on the party deck."

"It was until Security cut primary power. Musta gotten lots of complaints from the neighbors. No matter, we just moved down to the lower holds. No one cares what happens down there."

"So it would seem. I imagine its pretty difficult to damage several thousand tons of raw ore."

The holo board's comm system beeped for attention. Geles brushed her hair out of her eyes and scanned the new arrival, "Uh oh," she said to Folner, "It's the *Solar Fire* again, Lieutenant."

"Great. Okay, let 'em dock at Arm Eight. I'll notify Security to keep them and the *Black Hole*'s crew apart. The last thing we need is another fight on this station."

"Any idea who they are?" asked Geles.

"Just more spacers tryin' to sell their second rate stuff to creditless workers in the bleakest backwater in the galaxy."

"I mean who they *really* are. I'm positive they've both been here under other names."

Folner gave her a hard look. "I thought I told you not to ask questions. The commander doesn't like it, so you best forget about it. It's probably black market, but I don't want to know. Good way to end up fired or walking the airlock. Drop it."

<BEEEP!>

A loud signal erupted from the intercom.

"Shift change, Geles. Better keep an eye on that holo."

"Yeah. Nothing like coordinating the transfer of 200 ships between two stations and a planet in two hours," Geles flipped on her board, "Haulers 10 and 67, no racing in the spacelanes ..."

A Peaceful Demonstration

"I still can't believe we're doing this."

"You're the one who complains about the Empire all the time," the older man said, "You ought to be happy so many others believe as we do."

The student looked around at the hundreds — no, thousands — of people around him. "Yeah, I am," he said.

He turned to face his professor, "This is dangerous. There is no way that Moff Ramier is going to stand for it. Haven't you seen those reports from the Outer Rim? There've been —"

"atrocities beyond comprehension." Yes, I know, but it can't happen here. Look at all these people. This is a civilized world ... a sector capital, no less. The Empire can't touch us here. It would just cause more problems. They couldn't cover it up or blame it on something else. The government must listen to us. We're its people."

The student glanced around again. True, the BSDF had left them alone, allowing the march to proceed to the Central Sector. There, he knew, would be the rally and the speeches and the call for the restoration of all of their recently lost rights.

"But this is the Empire, not the Old Republic. I just can't believe ... what the?"

The crowd had turned to enter the Central Sector Square, where it suddenly came face to face with a

wall of Imperial stormtroopers, backed by scout walkers and Imperial Army troops. A voice from a loudspeaker broke through the gasps of shock and protest, "Attention citizens! This assembly has been declared illegal and banned by order of Moff Ramier and the Empire! Disperse immediately and return to your homes!"

A wave of shock rolled through the crowd, followed by screams of protest and disbelief. Just as some people began to move away from the square, something exploded at the foot of one of the scout walkers. Light blaster fire erupted from one side of the crowd, directed against the Imperials. The attack was answered with a much larger and more devastating barrage of blaster and heavy weapons fire from the stormtroopers and army troops.

At first, the crowd surged forward, moving as a single wave. That wave broke into a panicked rout as the AT-STs opened fire on the armed assailants. People stumbled and shoved their way out of the square. Some areas of the streets became battlefields, while others were packed solid with fleeing people.

The student and his professor escaped with minor injuries. Many others were killed — wounded in the battle or trampled in the panicked crowd. In less than 30 minutes, the battles — and the protests — were over.

New Arrival

Del stopped when he got to the open doorway.

"Hey, you must be the new guy. Come on in," called a voice from amongst a row of triple bunks. "Just throw your stuff on the empty bunk and we'll figure out where to put it later."

Del picked up his gear and stepped into the room, carefully making his way past the beds and crates, trying to avoid knocking over the precariously stacked piles of ... *stuff* on the floor.

"Uh, thanks. Looks like we're full up," he said to the young man, who was reading on one of the lower bunks. "Is it always this crowded?"

"Only since you Rebels began arriving," the man said, "Course, we could've never fit you all into the old place, so this is an improvement. At least we don't have to live out of those rusting freighters anymore, though I'd swear these beds came out of an old L-class troopship. By the way, I'm Barga."

"Del," said the newcomer, as he paused to shake hands, "Where are the others?"

Barga glanced around the room, "Well, most of 'em are on duty, I guess. I'm on night shift up in the control tower so I don't see 'em much. I think a couple may be on a supply run. I can't keep track very well with all the new people coming in. You'll probably meet 'em eventually; at least I did."

"I see. So this is a new base? No one's told me much."

"Don't expect them to. Your boss will give you a rundown on your job and the base. I imagine they'll have some kind of intro session again tomorrow night over in the common room."

Barga moved over to one of the piles of stuff. "Here, let's make some room for you," he said as he shoved some boxes under the bed. Reading one of the box's labels, he said, "Hmm, if anyone's looking for spare 473-L transformers, they're under here." The young man looked up. "As for the base, most of it's new. We were originally holed up in the hangar and a couple of tunnels, but your engineers have really done a job. Best thing old Reskan did was hook us up with the Alliance. We never expected to get this much help this soon. Of course, you'd think that they'd build enough storage so we wouldn't have to put up with all this junk. They said they might finish it later."

The young man sat down on his bunk again. "If you've got any pictures or holos or anything, you're welcome to put 'em up. We could use a little color. Arkvis put up what he said was a picture of his homeworld, but I guess a Human just can't see those wavelengths — just looks like a blank wall to me. It'd be nice to see something besides gray walls or green sky for a change."

Del glanced at the small holo collection in his case. "I may have just the thing," he said, smiling.



Imperial HoloVision: Brak Sector Report

A jingle of music plays as the head of a single figure appears on the holo pad.

"This is the Imperial HoloVision Brak Sector Report. After two days of skirmishes, sabotage, and raids, Rebel terrorists seem to have ended their widespread attacks against Imperial military forces and innocent civilians."

Scenes of starfighter battles flash by as the voice continues.

"The wave of violence and destruction which swept the sector has been the largest in Brak sector. Apparently, the so-called Rebel Alliance has targeted this sector in its vain attempt to topple the Empire. Imperial Command has reported that these attacks have created minimal damage to military assets and were targeted to cause maximum terror among the civilian population."

"In this latest round of terrorism, the Rebels attacked large numbers of civilians. Particularly hard hit was the sector's largest company, Lant Mining Corporation."

Holo images show burning industrial centers.

"Although damage estimates have yet to be completed, it is believed that most of the 30 facilities which were attacked will be out of service for at least eight months. LMC is reportedly reworking its production and delivery schedule to make up for the lost plants."

"Meanwhile, most citizens have become increasingly concerned about the terrorist attacks. Absolutely no public support for the Rebels has been reported."

Scenes of empty commuter speeders appear.

"Today, only half of LMC's employees arrived at work, fearing more attacks."

The scene fades, and a humanoid clothed in an LMC uniform appears. The name Lol Wikma appears.

"I work hard to keep my job. It's all I've got. Now some hothead wants to take that away from me in the name of 'justice' and what's right? I've got a family to feed."

The scene changes to show a smoking Refinery 435.

"How am I going to do that without the plant?"

The face of the anchorman returns.

"No explanation has been given for the attacks. In other news, an underworld crime war seems to have broken out ..."

INVISIBLE NEWS STACK

Rebel Forces Launch New Campaign In Sector

In an unprecedented two days of sector-wide attacks, the Rebel Alliance has apparently launched a new, large-scale campaign against Imperial forces in Brak sector. In contrast to previous actions, the Rebel Alliance has targeted everything from military installations and Imperial patrols to industrial plants and distribution centers.

While the Empire officially reports these attacks as "indiscriminate terrorist plays," a careful analysis shows otherwise. LMC, the largest of the civilian victims, its products to sell nationalized companies, mostly in the military complex. Some of its goods are sold directly to the Empire, for use at the Bacrana Shipyards. According to outside observers, the company is a legitimate military target.

Second, it appears that Rebel forces took great care in trying to protect innocent bystanders. Most attacks against civilian targets were carried out against unmanned areas. Eyewitnesses report that most Rebels fired only stun bolts. This seems hardly "indiscriminate."

Empire Arrests Hundreds In Crackdown

The Empire today announced the arrest of several hundred "suspected" Rebel sympathizers and operatives over the past two days.

Most independent observers have discovered that very few of the arrestees have any known connections with the Rebel Alliance. No word on when trials, if any, will begin.

Rebel Rescue Fails Yesterday

Rebel forces apparently attempted to rescue some of their own during an intense battle over Lish V in the Demar system. The jailbreak was foiled when Imperial cruisers arrived on the scene and routed the Rebel attackers. The Rebels fled without the prisoners after taking heavy casualties.

Bounty Hunters Attack Imperials, Free Arrestees

In what is believed to be an unrelated incident, some uncharacteristically bold bounty hunters ambushed an Imperial prison ship over Lish V yesterday. The registered bounty hunters of the *Icy Moon* were allowed to dock with the ship after claiming to have captured Rebel operatives. Once on board, however, they managed to free over 20 arrestees and escape.

Rebel Report



To: Brak Sector Command, Alliance High Command
From: General Reskan, Commander-in-Chief, Brak Sector
Regarding: Initial Report, Operation: Insignificant

Two days ago, Operation: Insignificant was initiated. It is my pleasure to report that the operation was carried out as planned (see Communiqué #041271/APL). What follows is an initial report.

LMC Sabotage Raids: Raids on LMC refineries, mines, and distribution centers carried out with minimal to light losses. Estimate repair time at 10 to 14 months for most facilities. Civilian casualties: light, as expected.

Imperial Patrols: Several light cruisers were successfully ambushed and destroyed.

Starfighter Attacks: Planned attacks succeeded with light losses. Impromptu attacks failed with heavy losses. Most devastating is the loss of half of Oracle Squadron in fighting over Lish V. See detailed report.

Assessment: Most mission objectives achieved. Attacks on LMC facilities should reduce the overall production of the company by 10 percent. Repair time for Interdictor-class cruiser in dock estimated to be lengthened by two months.

Current Situation: Planning to reduce military operations and replace losses. Expanding intelligence, cell networks and public support. Assessing damage to intelligence network.

Addendum: We've been very surprised by the Empire's deftness at parrying naval actions. Extraordinarily complicated but quickly planned operations have been successfully used against us (see separate Demar/Lish V report). It is obvious that our current intelligence network is not entirely secure and we are moving to correct this. Recommendations for promotions and commendations in final report.

With Respect,

General Trep Reskan
Brak Sector Commander-in-Chief

Imperial Report



To: Tilas Magore, Advisor
From: Moff Lesan Ramier, Brak Sector
Subject: Recent Rebel Activity

Honored Sir,

It is my unfortunate duty to report that an alarming number of Rebel attacks have recently occurred in Brak sector. From the number and magnitude of these attacks, it is reasonable to assume that the Rebel Alliance has taken a greater interest in the sector. I believe that more attacks are forthcoming.

Operations are currently underway to locate and defeat the Rebel forces. Rebel agents and sympathizers have been arrested throughout the sector. A few known Rebel agents have been left in place to feed false information to the Alliance. In the past, we have been successful in drawing Rebel forces into a trap this way. Public misinformation campaigns have also been initiated.

I have increased our naval patrols three-fold, and tightened security at all Imperial stations. I respectfully request more ships, particularly Star Destroyers, for expanded patrol sweeps.

Admiral Trier and General Lacmar both express confidence in their forces, but are concerned about the lack of information regarding Rebel tactics. They request any new information as it becomes available.

LMC has begun to bolster its Security forces in response to the recent attacks. I have ordered ISB agents to infiltrate LMC in an attempt to track its activities, I believe the company should be considered for nationalization.

The Emperor's Servant,
Moff Lesan Ramier
Brak Sector

Galladinium's Galactic Datalog of Fantastic Technology

WELCOME TO GALLADINIUM

Welcome to the 50th anniversary edition of *Galladinium's Galactic Datalog of Fantastic Technology*. For 50 standard years, the executives and employees of Galladinium Galactic Exports have dedicated themselves to bringing you the very finest in Imperial technology. We at Galladinium are proud of our reputation for supplying our customers with only the highest quality merchandise. Since opening its doors, Galladinium has spared no expense in searching the far corners of the galaxy for rare and exotic technology in keeping with your expectations of high performance and good taste.

Ranging the gamut from servant droids to personal defense items, from luxury speeders to gigantic sun jammers, this datalog truly has something for everyone.

Take some time to browse through this special 50th edition illustrated datalog. We think you'll find that we at Galladinium Exports offer the very finest technology available to the Empire's citizens. At the very least, this datalog serves as a unique testimony to the many marvels of Imperial scientific research and development.

A WORD FROM THE PRESIDENT

They said it couldn't be done ... but Galladinium defied the odds. With hard labor and responsible sacrifice, in the space of five short decades Galladinium has become the galaxy's leading interstellar consumer datalog merchandiser.

As we look to our next 50 years, it is appropriate to take a moment to reflect on how far we have come. We at Galladinium would be remiss if we did not pause to take stock of the sweeping social and political events currently shaping our galaxy.

We at Galladinium have prospered under the Empire and have always sought to share that prosperity and scientific progress with others. To this end, we support the Empire's attempts to contain and eventually stamp out the Rebel threat to peace. To this end — through deeds and not just words — with every order placed with our firm in the next 100 standard days, Galladinium will contribute five percent of the proceeds to the Imperial Defense Fund. Please keep this in mind when placing your next order. Remember who has made that order possible.



Illustrations by Marc Vilard

"It's really not like Justahl to be late for a meeting."
"No, it's not like him at all."
"Certainly not for a meeting as important as this."
"Quite. Do you think he's aware of the starting time?"
"He set the meeting up himself."
"Well, if he's not here in 12 seconds, he'll simply have to forfeit his share options to Kemends."
"Quite a pity don't you think?"
"Yes. Quite. Never did like Kemends all that much."
"I know what you mean. Oh, look, there's Justahl now."
"Really? Where?"
"Outside the window."
"Stuff and poshtish. We're 200 meters above the ground."
"Apparently so is Justahl."

Outside a spectacled figure in the latest Dervdisi fashioned suit slowly descended to the ledge. His jump jet compensated nicely against the building's wind sheer at the last moment — precisely what was needed to complete the illusion of effortless flight.

Smoothing back his ruffled hair, Vice-President Justahl palmed a control panel along the outer wall. The transparisteel window slid back to admit the almost-but-not-quite-late executive. He paused only a second to remove the small jet pack and then the corporate magnate settled in his chair, pausing only to give his opponent a brief but steely glance. He commenced as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

"I see we're all assembled. Good. Thank you for coming. Shall we begin?"

Young Prestor broke out of the cloud cover doing 200 kilometers per hour. Once past the urban zone, he pushed the throttle forward, giving it all she could take. After playing tag with Dorqweull for a couple of clicks, he hauled back just enough to make a tight turn to the left. He waved to the young women as he blasted past their rooftops; the angry oaths of parental types were lost in the whine of protesting turbines.

Prestor cooled down the motor as he came in close to the rooftop skimmer pad. Thumbing an auto relay, he watched as the rooftop slowly slid away. Hover jets cushioned the touchdown.

"Hi, Dad. I'm back. Here's the evening faxsplat. By the way, feel free to ask me to run errands for you any time you want ..."

The carrier rounded the corner with the shriek of protesting engines, its driver doing his utmost to put some distance between him and his pursuers. Behind the swiftly moving vehicle, first one, then two swoops dodged power poles and street lamps in an effort to overtake the carrier.

Dodging blaster bolts with a skill born of countless similar encounters, the carrier's driver shifted power to the right exhaust port while reversing thrust to the left exhaust port. The carrier swung into a sharp turn, narrowly avoiding the Customs Building's exterior. The motion of their passing set off home-made vibro-mines placed in the alleyway the night before.

The carrier emerged from the alley only to find an armed mob awaiting their arrival. Given the most likely outcome should they be forced down, the driver shifted emergency power to the forward shields and dropped the nose of the craft to a scant half-meter above ground. The driver would not let the protestors halt his progress ...

Minutes later, the carrier settled quietly into its docking bay behind sealed blast doors. Having arrived safe and secure, the carrier's passenger disembarked to begin the work of another day.

"Good morning, Governor. How was the trip this morning?"

"Pretty quiet for this time of year. What's on the agenda for this morning, Revan?"

Revella stroked the drooping head and softly cooed to her faithful companion. "You're my best friend in the whole galaxy, Seti! You won't let those bad men get me, will you?"

Seti lifted his head to let his sad eyes meet those of his mistress. A waggle of his long snout and a playful chuck under her chin was all the answer she needed.

"Good boy, Seti. I knew you wouldn't let me down. Just let those bad ol' Rebels try to harm me with you around ..."

Revella put her arms around Seti's solar collector panels and hugged the droid for all she was worth. Seti's visual sensors glowed for a second as it scanned the horizon for any sign of the intruders it knew was out there somewhere ...

— Scene from *Revella's Journey: A Story of a Girl and Her Droid*, reprinted here with permission from Millennium Entertainments.

"For your dining pleasure this evening, gentlemen and ladies, I have produced a crisp caramaxoian salad with Dihneral herb-and-ale dressing. For the next course, a rack of toasted Febrini sand-prestors with a subtle gangini sauce. For your main course, you will have a selection of either Velossian caramachi shell-backs in white suvoli cream, or roasted Hillindor game fowl in brestel nuts with zinchari spice. For desert, I have arranged an assortment of Cavaellin spiced creams. I trust that will be acceptable."

"Everything sounds fine, my dear fellow. Do commence."

"As you say, sir."

"434-FPC is such a treasure. He's an absolute wizard in the kitchen. The best part of it is that he works for free. Just give him an occasional lubricant bath and he's happy!"

He knew he had to be careful. One slip and the information could fall into the wrong hands. Defas looked nervously over his shoulder for the hundredth time while his fingers continued to fly over the keyboard.

"Who's up there?"

How did they find him so soon? No matter! Just keep working.

"All right, whoever you are, come out of there!"

Don't stop now, just a little more to go.

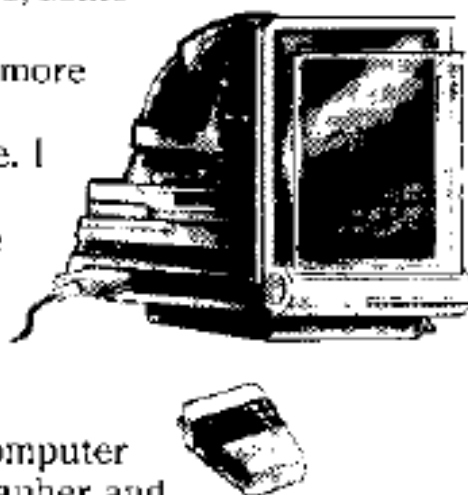
"This is your last chance. I want you out here, now!"

Finished! And just in the nick of time, too.

"I'll be right out, Father. Just finishing up some school work."

Defas disconnected his computer interface from the cryptographer and surveyed the sheet coming out of the output slot. The information confirmed his hopes.

That's one grade card they'll never see!



The throng outside the Imperial Cavalcade of Stars last night waited nearly six hours in near-freezing rain to get a glimpse of holo-vid siren Quintana Trill. It was well known that Lady Trill never missed an opening night screening of her new holofilms. Similarly, few doubted that when she finally did appear, "Quinta" (as she is known to her fans) would make a spectacular entrance.

Quinta's fans were not disappointed. A bare three minutes before the holo's opening sequence, with an eight-man escort, Quinta Trill's speeder settled down outside the Cavalcade and the actress emerged to a thunderous round of applause. The hearty ovations were cut short, however, by the unexpected display that greeted the crowd.

Quinta emerged from her speeder covered in liquid fire. Rivulets of blue, red, and amber flame seemed to dance about her person while a halo of yellow moonbeams flowed down her shoulder-length black hair. As she moved toward the theater's entranceway, with every fluid motion the sparkle of a hundred miniature novas rippled around her. When she waved to her astonished admirers, flame danced from her fingertips and the trail of her gown reflected a soft ashen glow that gave the illusion of Quinta gliding along the path like some mythological heroine of old. The net result was a spectacular entrance few will ever forget. Regrettably, Quinta's latest holo-vid, *Denizens of Dakaret IX*, has met with less than spectacular reviews.

— From "Your Stars And Mine," Morgaine Deletrinquin, Society News Editor, *Chandrilan Daily Messenger*.

... Mareoian had suspected Rekvan would propose to her for some time now. She could barely control her excitement when she opened the box with the small holocube and BioRecorder. Inserting the cube in the access slot on the BioRecorder, she pressed the play button and watched as the image of Rekvan spilled out over her bedroom floor. Before she could respond, he was saying those words she'd longed for so very long to hear. Simply hearing them was not the end of it; even as Rekvan's image spoke lovingly of his feelings for her, Mareoian could somehow sense the depth of those feelings. Somehow, she felt the throb of Rekvan's pulse quickening and then racing as the words poured out of him. This was no simple holo-vid, she realized.

— from *Beneath The Galdronian Moon: A Modern Lover's Epic* by Verigriss Tranex.

THE UNIVERSAL GAME OF SPHEROIDS ...

"It is said that the universe invented the game of spheroids. Certainly the game has much in common with the way in which planets, asteroids and comets interact in planetary gravity wells. Exactly who first invented spheroids is unclear, as several cultures have had equivalent versions for some time. The modern two-player version uses a varying number of spherical projections at established orbital patterns within a 2- to 10-meter diameter sphere, each with different velocities and trajectories. Each player has a command sphere as well as anywhere from 6-24 spheres.

"The object of the game is to use one's command sphere to strike any of the opponent's spheres, causing them to ricochet into the 'sun' at the center of the grid. Each player makes an attempt, a successful 'plummet' into the sun granting a second, subsequent

shot. A miss causes play to revert to one's opponent. Play alternates until one side has eliminated all of the opposing planetary spheres. Points are scored for a 'base' win, in addition to bonus points for multiple plummets and plummets caused by secondary and tertiary sphere collisions.

"A relatively new feature is the optional use of 'black holes,' two or more of which are randomly positioned on the grid at the start of the game. Entrance of a sphere into a black hole causes the globe to reappear randomly somewhere else on the game grid. As this adds a bit more uncertainty to the flow of the game, not every player enjoys risking the outcome of an important match to such unpredictability. Still, many enjoy the 'openness' this feature adds."

— Extract from *Galactic Games And Competitions*,
27th edition, V.F.G. Corvallis, editor

... Delindras Axt paused to line up the spherical hologram in her hand with one of another hue circling several centimeters to her right and above her head. After confirming the proper angle, the three-time spheroids champion hurled the sphere.

The oval image moved swiftly from her hand, speeding forward to strike its intended target. The second sphere then angled high above her head and impacted with a third. The latter collided with two more, all three of them careening into the brilliant sun at the center of the holo display.

That was the "impossible" shot the crowd had been waiting for. The difficult shot executed to her satisfaction, she smiled smugly at her Twi'lek opponent before responding cheerfully to the crowd. Gadsle glared back but made no sound. With the applause of half the star system ringing in her ears she regarded her opponent one last time.

That'll be the last time Gadsle brags his way into a game at my expense. Serves him right. Now maybe he'll go home and learn how professionals play. I might give him a re-match ... say in five or 10 years.

Vacor looked over the gold and green squares for the hundredth time. There was little doubt about it: Baas had outmaneuvered him. The more he studied the board, the more he had to admire his play. The attacking combination had materialized seemingly out of nowhere, devastating in impact, subtle in execution. Vacor looked across the board at the thin man in the plasticene suit. Vacor couldn't help thinking Baas looked more like a banker than a grandmaster. He smiled at the champion.

"Your reputation does not do you justice, Master Baas."

"You put up a fair fight, young man. Keep playing that way and some day I may have to start getting worried."

High praise coming from so talented a performer! Vacor leaned over the table, intending to shake his opponent's hand. In the process, he inadvertently tipped over his Holdfast, the traditional, unspoken signal of defeat. With that, the program ended and the hologram of the long dead master Krestin Baas disappeared just as he was about to take Vacor's hand.

Vacor sighed in frustration. *Well, maybe next time ...*

Mardig knew this was the last shuttle flight to Carsanza for another week. Miss this one and he might as well punch in his resignation before being fired. Racing through the crowded terminal, he reflected that no one would believe him when he told them the departure time had been moved up without warning. With his repulsorlift carrier in tow, Mardig dodged debarking passengers and narrowly avoided baggage carts with a deftness born of experience.

There! The portal gateway was dead ahead, just beyond the security scan point. *No! Don't close the gate yet! It's still four minutes to lift-off!* With a final curse against whatever galactic fates ruled the mystical process of scheduling orbital shuttles, Mardig threw his remaining bag, and then himself, onto the carrier.

With a shrill "Gang way!" echoing behind him, Mardig flew past the astonished security guards, gliding to a stop scant millimeters from the portal hatchway. Whatever she might have thought of Mardig's arrival, the Tri-Planetary Atmospheric attendant was professional enough to keep such comments to herself.

"Will that be oxygen or alternate cabin atmosphere, sir?"

Dismounting from his trusty carrier, Mardig nonchalantly removed a spec of lint from his tunic before handing over his boarding disk.

"Oxygen, if you please ..."

Locara had courage, you had to give her that. There were few people who would willingly march into Boss Gew'lek's office unannounced, sit themselves down, and start demanding that the boss fork over some hefty credits for a recent hit. But that's just what she did.

Marching in like she owned the place, Locara sat herself down in the boss's best chair, her hands resting on that fancy cane of hers, and looked the Boss dead in the eye to demand money!

"I understand you were the one who ordered the hit on the Cavalier Club tonight. You owe me 50,000 credits for that little indiscretion."

"You've got to be joking. Just who do you think you are barging in here at this time of night?"

Slam! Down went her cane, ringing loudly against the parqueted wood floor.

"On second thought, make that 60,000 credits. My time is valuable, don't you know?"

"You've got a lot to learn about respectin' other people's privacy, Locara."

Slam! Down went the cane a second time, and now a strange light seemed to enter Locara's eyes. From where I was standing, it looked almost like anticipation.

"Throw another 10,000 into the pot for my cleanup costs."

"This was humorous for a moment or two, but I have business. Boys, show the 'lady' the way out."

Slam! Down went that irritating cane a third time. And a fourth, and a fifth! Having gotten everybody's attention, Locara removed her hands from the cane's top. Suddenly we could all see the ruby-red glow of a power point on maximum load. With the tip now resting a couple of millimeters from his face, the Boss was in an especially good position to see it as well. No one moved.

"That was 70,000, wasn't it?"

Jabot watched as his partner, Dereth, nervously eyed his opponent from beyond the ornamental guide rails that separated the spectators from the last remaining players. Resisting the urge to acknowledge his partner's presence, Jabot focused instead on the person seated across from him. Merex's open sneer conveyed his contempt for Jabot:

From behind the velvet ropeguards, a nondescript alien in a green jumpsuit squinted hard against the bright lights. Despite the distance, Dereth could see Merex's cards with crystal clarity. His feline slit pupils widened in astonishment, his thoughts echoing his amazement.

He's got garbage, Jabot! Two low-grade power cards, a scout, one knight and a lone baron — he's got nothing!

Jabot looked at his own hand: three trusty knights supporting a baron and baroness. He waited until Merex added the latest circular card to his hand. Soundlessly he queried his partner a second time.

And now?

An equally soundless reply from across the room was forthcoming. *He ditched a power card and got — zip — another power card. Still trash!*

Thank you, Dereth. You'd best leave the area now to avoid arousing any suspicion. This will be over soon enough.

"Well, Jabot?" Merex was getting anxious, posing as if he was going to make a big kill.

"Let's make this sporting, Merex. I wager 10,000 credits."

Show off! echoed in the back of his brain

Hush, Dereth.

"You're bluffing, Jabot. But I'll show you who's the better Helcos player. I'll match your wager and I'll triple it."

Dereth was already on his way out, but couldn't help sending one last, triumphal comment into his partner's head. *He's totally bluffing, Jabot! You've got him! We'll have enough to get our ship back!*

We will, assuming you stop shouting long enough for me to finish him off! Okay, so you were right about the implants after all. But I still say I it gives me a splitting headache.

So, I'll buy you a pharmaceutical production plant with my share of the take, Jabot!

Fine Dereth, fine. Now off with you!

Jabot had to admit he was going to enjoy what came next.

"I must acknowledge, Merex, you are indeed a good player. However, my Borlorian friend ..." Jabot paused, his webbed hands already extended to rake in his winnings. "... I'm afraid this time, not good enough."

With that, Jabot laid down his cards and began scooping up his earnings. Glasses around the room shattered as the Borlorian howled his discontent to the universe at large.

The air was alive! In his mind's eye, Joraaz could see the avian's telescopic view of the mountain ahead. His brain tingled with the beast's eagerness; the anticipation he felt was shared by his mount.

A shadow fell on his left wrist, signaling impending danger. Almost too late, Joraaz swerved down and to the right. Scant meters away, the massive outline of another red- and blue-feathered mount swerved left. Joraaz noted that the beast's talons had been extended. As anger rose inside him, his own mount screamed a matching cry of anger; he felt the creature projecting a desire for revenge.

All right, Mithran, if that's the way you want to play it ...

Joraaz projected his thoughts toward the great beast beneath him. With an anticipation that rivaled his own, the creature lunged up and after the attacker.

Frehjak, don't try to get above him. He'll be expecting that. Stay below him. I've got an idea.

Joraaz's tranthebar bucked the wind currents to slowly cross the meters to the other tranthebar and her rider. With the sun behind them, Joraaz knew he might be able to approach undetected.

Any minute now, Joraaz expected to see Mithran spot him and end this grudge race once and for all. But luck, and the sun, was with Joraaz and his tranthebar mount Frehjak that morning.

Joraaz maneuvered the giant avian underneath his enemy's own mount. *One final sacrifice*, he thought to his mount. In response to his silent request, Frehjak tossed his head once. Smiling his thanks, Joraaz bent down and plucked a single fresh feather from just below the fourth harness strap.

Careful to avoid the other avian's huge talons, which could rip him apart with a single swipe, Joraaz reached up to the one vulnerable spot on his enemy's mount.

Tickle, tickle, tickle!

A sharp plummet narrowly saved Joraaz from the creature's reflex swipe with its claws. As he leveled out, Joraaz smiled to himself as he watched Mithran fighting to regain control, his mount in an ungainly tailspin as it clawed at itself to be rid of an unseen irritant.

It doesn't matter if you win or lose ... better luck next time, Mithran!

"Fleet admirals have it made. They only have to worry about the success of their subordinates, their Moff, and guys whose name begins with Lord."

— Captain Seledrood (deceased)

"... In this time of rebellion and turmoil, most of you can expect to be stationed aboard vessels which will see action, or at bases which assist those ships. Others will be placed on picket in remote star systems, or be assigned planet-side to ordnance dumps, research stations, or other support duties.

"I cannot disguise the fact that some of these are unexciting missions, galling to the crewman anxious to prove himself in service to the Empire. I can encourage you to take heart, for your duty assignment is re-evaluated biannually. If there is need, and your performance warrants it, you will be transferred to a more vital assignment. In the same way, those who have seen combat for more than two standard years are rotated out to less taxing duties, allowing fresh vessels and crew to take their place. At least, that is the ideal the Navy strives for."

— Excerpt from crew graduation speech at Prefsbelt Fleet Camp, delivered by Moff Gaaqu.

"... You are part of the greatest navy ever assembled. The might of the Empire rests on the military — and the Imperial Navy embodies the most elite and trusted segment of that power. Only the best, the most disciplined, are admitted to our ranks. We who serve the Emperor in the Imperial Navy have made this Empire the irresistible, galaxy-spanning force it is today."

— Excerpt from Academy cadet indoctrination speech delivered by Fleet Admiral Holt.

To: Ail Sector Commanders
From: General Nasda, ISB
Subject: Imperial Recruitment

Following the defection of the Imperial Army infantry units of Wazta (see Imperial Communique #2734.19g), an unspecified number of Imperial Navy vessels and their crews have deserted. This spate of defections to the Rebellion must stop. We cannot continue to allow Rebel sympathizers to enter Imperial service for the sole purpose of undermining morale.

At the same time, unexpected losses suffered by Imperial forces engaged against Rebels in the Yavin system have highlighted the need to increase the rate of Imperial recruitment. You will personally ensure that your recruitment and training procedures are brought into line with the following directives.

"The time you spend at this Academy is the longest period of officer training in the Empire. At the end of 30 months of rigorous physical and academic training, you will receive a commission as a lieutenant in the Imperial Navy. You will know more than your peers, and have greater responsibilities than your peers. If you perform your duties well, they will not remain your equals for long. Officers from this Academy — and only this Academy — are recognized as the very best the Emperor has to command.

"You will serve the Emperor best by mastering everything you have come here to learn: the behavior and standards expected of an officer of the Imperial Navy. If you are selected for flight school, you have even more demanding training ahead after your graduation. You are expected to complete it with the same degree of excellence you will show in your Academy studies.

"Our credo is 'Service. Fealty. Fidelity.' This may be the first time you have heard it. By the time you graduate, it is one you will never forget."

— Excerpt from Academy cadet indoctrination speech delivered by Fleet Admiral Holt.

"Very often mission requirements compel us to work closely with the Army. It is counterproductive to let a negative attitude toward ground troops interfere with the accomplishment of mission objectives."

— from a lecture on inter-service cooperation by Training Lieutenant Danos.

"I don't take any smart talk from treads, ff they get in my way, I offer them a quick trip out the nearest airlock. They have to back off. They got no thrust on shipboard, and no vector to use it in."

— unofficial comments on soldiers by Training Lieutenant Danos.



FELLOW REBELS IN THE FIELD:

I've been told that a lot of you are familiar with my exploits and that you consider me something of a legend. I don't see why you should. Every one of you are heroes, and some day your stories will be legendary as well. Your membership in the Alliance shows that you have tremendous bravery, conviction, and character.

However, I do have a few years on most of you. Rebel HQ thought it would be advantageous if I passed on some of my field experience.

The Rebel Alliance, of course, does not have the resources and funds to go shopping for supplies. Sometimes it receives new equipment or donations from systems or corporations that have thrown their loyalty to the cause, and for that the Alliance is grateful, but for the most part troops make do with what is at hand.

This datafile was written with this understanding. What few supplies the Alliance has must be carefully doled out to major operations. This datafile is for those of you who pave the way for the major offensives by getting behind Imperial blockades, making diplomatic contacts with beleaguered star systems, running covert operations to obtain documents, and other important missions.

In short, this datafile is for the Rebel on the go who doesn't have much backing him up.

The information herein depends on a familiarity with technology. We live in an age of technological marvels — and dangers. You must all become familiar with the way things work. It is not enough that machines do tasks for you, for with that attitude you are imprisoned by the abilities of the machinery. You must be able to make the machine do what you need it to do. If

you can't handle technology, you're no better than a Throg-bellied, soft-spined, blue-haired Angroosh who doesn't stand a chance in the Alliance the minute things get rough.

Technology, however, can be seductive. Over my lifetime I've seen a proliferation of cybernetic enhancements in black market trade. Too many people, especially the youngsters, want to get an edge over the universe with electronic implants. While a prosthetic to replace a lost organ or limb is a valid choice, the desire to rebuild your body simply to be better. . . I don't think I need to spell this out, but you're giving up part of *yourself* when you do that. And you can't give up yourself without paying a steep price.

I've included some of the cybernetic packages in this volume so that you're aware of what's out there — not so you'll run out and buy one. You should know that there still exists a great prejudice in the galaxy against cyborgs. To be part machine is to earn the distrust of almost everyone you run into. From what I've seen of what happens to people who start to rely on these machines, the mistrust is well founded.

I also want you all to think about the importance of information. The new kids coming up think this war is all about zipping around in under-armored starfighters. The real battle is fought with information! How do they think the Alliance won the battle of Yavin? Skywalker wouldn't have been able to do Bantha poot with his X-wing if he hadn't gotten those plans to the Rebellion!

Anyway, these are the random recollections of a man who spent a great deal of time making it up as he went along. I pray that you find the same success that I did.

May the Force be with You,
General Airen Cracken

Cynabar's Fantastic Technology: Droids

The starship battle raged as if it had a life force of its own. Many ships had been lost to both sides already and the Alliance and Imperial commanders alike knew that the Rebels didn't have an inexhaustible supply of fighters (the Imperial Star Destroyer *Vehemence* certainly appeared to have-as one Rebel crewer put it-all the guns in the universe behind it).

A lone Y-wing limped along the periphery of the battle, her pilot a veteran of many such engagements. "Flight Leader Wilkins, beginning my run," he intoned calmly. Keying his comlink for a quick message to his astromech, he called out, "Better hang on back there, buddy."

BXET-R2 (or "Box" as his master was fond of calling him), checked the restraining straps and clamps that held him in place behind the cockpit of the Y-wing. The R2-unit emitted a mournful beep and Wilkins chuckled as he read the translation on his computer system: "Try not to crash this time."

The Y-wing sped through the carnage, as Wilkins cautiously, carefully placed the aiming reticle of his missile launchers squarely on the *Vehemence*. The fighter sped forward, crossing the kilometers to the Star Destroyer rapidly, as the targeting computer sought for a lock on the *Vehemence's* bridge.

Just as the targeting computer signalled a positive lock, Wilkins triggered his firing controls while his backseat gunner blazed away at the Star Destroyer's shields with the Y-wing's ion cannons. A brilliant spray of light and fire illuminated the area, blinding the pilot.

Too late, Box howled a warning to the blinded pilot as a TIE bomber-damaged in the explosions-careened into the Y-wing's path, striking the forward shields and sending the pair of fighters spinning wildly out of control.

Box ran diagnostics on the ship and reported both blaster cannons on the nose of the Y-wing had been sheared completely off. The cockpit still had a breathable atmosphere but structural damage to the nose was considerable.

Box patched into the ship's internal sensors and found that Master Wilkins was still breathing and did indeed have a pulse. Still he failed to answer over the comm. The droid peered into the cockpit and saw that Wilkins and his ion gunner were slumped over in their seats.

Taking control of the drive system, Box corrected the Y-wing's wild spin, halting the craft smoothly. Checking the navigational sensors, the droid noticed the TIE bomber had also regained control and was limping towards the damaged Y-wing, positioning itself for the inevitable kill shot.

The droid began carefully modulating the gravity within the cockpit in an attempt to jostle the pilot awake. At the same time, Box plugged into the auxiliary control port with one of his many appendages and lurched the Y-wing forward and up into an arch that brought her out and away from the bomber's current vector.

The bomber-badly damaged itself-spun past without acquiring a target lock and was sluggishly repositioning for another shot. BXET-R2 tied into the Y-wing's fire control system and armed the proton torpedo launcher. Sending the ship into as steep a dive as possible he inverted the ship and triggered off a wild shot, sending the blue-white projectile hurtling at the Imperial fighter.

The Imperial pilot frantically avoided the missile, once again losing control of his damaged vehicle. A moment later, Box activated the Y-wing's hyperdrive and the stubby fighter leapt into hyperspace and away from the battle....

"Droid: A mechanical and/or electronic construct designed and put into service to assist organic life."

--From the Cybot Galactica Design Team Operations Manual

RYBETTIAN SHAC

Ramsey Lanclo was muttering to himself, an endless stream of exotic Soccoran curses and panicked exclamations. Lanclo gingerly operated his freighter's controls, cautiously connecting the *Chicanery's* airlock to the boarding tube that a nearby Imperial Customs Frigate had extended. Ramsey hadn't shipped any contraband for over six standard months, but money was getting tight and his cargo bay currently held enough glitterstim to make him an incredibly wealthy man ... or see him sentenced to Kessel for the next 1,000 standard years. "I knew I should have stuck to prefabs and power generators," he shouted, shaking his fist at the Imperial vessel that filled his viewport. "How are we going to get out of *this* one?"

"What seems to be the problem?" Ramsey's droid, XDL-67 ambled into the cockpit. XDL barely resembled the cook-droid it had once been. Its mixer arm had been replaced with a functional hand, and its programming had been enhanced to include general starship maintenance and repair.

"The problem," Ramsey explained, glaring angrily at the droid, "is that in less than three minutes this ship will be crawling with Imperials. And we've got no way of stopping them from finding our 'special' cargo." He leaned against the bulkhead and tried to look nonchalant. XDL glanced at the monitor displaying data from the external holocam.

"Captain, isn't that Agent Hewet's frigate?" XDL gestured at the insignia and markings that were now clearly visible on the Customs vessel's hull.

"I think so. So what?"

Instead of answering, XDL turned and faced aft, emitting a baritone moan from its vocoder grille. Ramsey winced at the noise, knowing what it meant. The sound of scrapes on steel deck plate answered XDL's call. Within seconds the captain's pet—a curious marsupial called a "keon"—bounded into the room. The diminutive creature circled Ramsey's leg and scurried up his body, finally finding a perch on the freighter captain's shoulder.

"Hey, what's the big idea bringing the rodent into this?" Ramsey asked, scowling at his mechanical counterpart. Before it could respond, the droid was silenced by the distinctive hiss of the airlock's admittance cycle.

Two stormtroopers—blaster rifles sweeping around the room with menacing precision—entered in unison, taking up guard positions on either side of the airlock. A moment later, a human female wearing the uniform of an Imperial Customs agent followed. Ramsey tried not to wince at the woman's caustic smirk; from bitter experience, Lanclo knew that

Hewet's smile meant trouble. At the first sign of the new arrivals the keon hid behind Ramsey's head. The stormtroopers took position on either side of the airlock as she stepped forward. Ramsey grinned at the agent and spoke.

"Agent Hewet," Lanclo said, displaying his most charming smile. "So pleasant to see you again. How've you been?"

"Cut the smoke, pilot." She removed her gloves and placed her hands on her hips. "My sources tell me you've been to see the Rybet." Ramsey knew she meant Moruth Doole, a rather nasty individual who ran the smuggling ring out of Kessel with an iron fist.

"Who, me?" Ramsey forced a laugh. "C'mon. You know I went legit a long time ago."

From somewhere in the room, a tiny, high-pitched voice squeaked, echoing the smuggler's previous statement: "C'mon-You-legit-ago!"

Agent Hewet glanced around the room. "What was that, Lanclo?"

As if in response, the keon popped its head out from behind Ramsey and mimicked the Imperial: "What-Lanclo?"

She looked up in surprise. An evil grin played across her face. "Captain," she said, a predatory smile tugging at her lips. "Do you have a permit for that ... creature?"

Ramsey bowed his head. "I'm afraid not," he replied. XDL took a short step forward. Ramsey jerked suddenly in surprise at having forgotten the droid was there. *Oh, am I gonna get you for this droid,* he thought to himself. *This time I'm gonna pull you apart and build a trash compactor out of your shell.*

"Ma'am," the droid drawled, bowing its head in a fair approximation of human obsequiousness. "If I remember correctly, don't you have a daughter on Yityl?"

Agent Hewet looked at the droid, shocked to be addressed by a mechanical. The stormtroopers raised their blasters to a more comfortable position. A position aimed in XDL's general direction.

"Yes," she said, her voice brittle as Hoth ice. "I do have a daughter. How does this concern you?" ("Daughter-concern," echoed the keon.)

"Well, madam agent," he continued, "it will be some time before we arrive at an Imperial dock to purchase a permit and license for this little fellow." Ramsey's head slowly rose, knowing what the droid was getting at. "Perhaps you would like to take it off our hands." Hewet crossed her arms.

"And why would I want to do that, droid?"

"With respect, Agent Hewet, you could bring your daughter a lovely pet, and it would save us the trouble of having to port specifically to acquire a

"Recon Log 129873.2183, Team Leader Gessak reporting. I believe I have found a promising site during my search for a forward outpost. Today, while sweeping the inner rim of the local asteroid belt—see nav ref. 1821—I detected a small asteroid just inside the field. At first glance, the asteroid appeared to be fairly innocuous. As it rotated by, however, I noticed a large dark area on the asteroid's magnetic southern 'hemisphere.'

"I went in for a closer look and, sure enough, there was a large opening at the bottom of an impact crater. As I went in, I saw numerous large cracks radiating out from the opening.

"Matching speed and rotation, I slipped my ship into the opening. Since the rock has insufficient mass and rotation to generate its own gravity, I decided against going EVA. Hovering my craft inside the cavern, I released my probe droid to survey

the rest of the place. The return data was very encouraging. Radiating out from the central cavern were three passageways, leading to several other chambers. The small width of the passageways is suitable for the construction of airlocks and is relatively easy to defend. Better yet, the asteroid's structure appears to be quite stable, despite the ancient impact damage.

"Without too much trouble, we can convert this cavern into a forward listening post, cache or staging area. The depth of the entrance beneath the surrounding surface effectively hides it from sight. There's even enough debris around here to lose pursuers before ducking into safety. My recommendation to Alliance Command: Let's grab this rock."

—Excerpt from Recon Mission D812, Team Leader Mils Gessak's logs.

Pirates & Privateers

"... In other news, the ISB, Imperial Navy, and Commerce branch of the Coalition for Progress issued a joint committee report today on the increasing tide of Rebel piracy. The joint committee was originally founded in response to the lightning raids launched by the *Far Orbit*, a Rebel frigate that terrorized the Core Worlds for several months last year. The report calls for an increase in military spending for the Navy and Sector Rangers in response to the atmosphere of general lawlessness spread by these Rebel terrorist-pirates. More than a dozen individual Rebel pirate captains were added to the Empire's Most Wanted list, with another twenty added to the Locate and Detain list. The report likens the current situation to the days of piracy in the years prior to the Emperor's reign ..."

— excerpt from IHV report.

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Admiral Ackbar: "Madame, I wish to open the matter of the privateering experiment. It is my firm belief that while temporarily expedient, using these mercenaries is ultimately counterproductive. The

Alliance can supply itself without resorting to contracting private raiders."

Chief of State Mon Mothma: "Admiral, your reluctance to implement this plan is well-documented, and I see little point in documenting it further. For the record, I am also somewhat hesitant to sanction pirate attacks, even on our deadliest enemies. However, I believe Minister Muvunc has a comment."

Minister Ral'Rai Muvunc: "Yes, Madame. Admiral Ackbar, I should like to point out that if you truly do not need the 400,000 tons of food and air, 230 canisters of blaster gas, 90 main space weapons, and 700,000 tons of miscellaneous equipment provided by this 'mercenary experiment,' you are perfectly free to load all of it on the 71 assorted cargo and utility ships and three ships-of-the-line also seized by our privateers in the last standard year, and auto-pilot them into a convenient star."

— excerpt from minutes of the 267th High Command meeting.

■ ■ ■

"Don't tell me you're only in this for the money. If you were, you never would have signed on with the Alliance!"

— overheard comment from an Alliance observer agent to a privateer captain.

Beginnings and Renewals

Xhaxin reviewed the contract renewal to make sure no last-minute changes had found their way into it; while the Alliance had never done anything to betray him, Xhaxin had not risen to command a private warship by being overly trusting. Satisfied that the basic letter of marque had not been altered, he signed the scandoc and handed it to his first mate to countersign. The Alliance man also countersigned and copied the letter into his own datapad.

"This is Special Agent Hast. He'll be your Alliance observer during this cruise," said the representative, gesturing to indicate the tall, quiet human beside him. "Good hunting," he said, then turned and left the bridge. Xhaxin nodded absently.

"Mister Hast, I understand you have something for me," Xhaxin said.

Hast nodded, lifting the case he had carried aboard. "This needs to be patched into your main communications system. It carries encryption codes, comm frequencies, and Code Quasar."

"I've done this before, you know," Xhaxin said dryly as he sized up the quiet agent. A gaunt Quarren came and bore the case off.

"I'll need to stow my gear, Captain. If you'll excuse me," Hast started to move off with a familiar spacer's gait.

"Mister Hast." Something about the observer was bothering Xhaxin, and the privateer captain was determined to find out what it was. "What navy did you serve in?"

"Alliance for the last three years. After I resigned my Imperial commission," Hast responded, his voice quiet

but still capable of cutting through the normal din of an operating starship command center.

"I see," Xhaxin replied. "For the record, Observer Hast, the *Free Lance* is not exactly a spit-and-polish Imp vessel. And most of my crew hate the Empire. The Rebellion trusts you, but I do not. If you do anything to jeopardize my ship or my crew, I will personally shove you out the airlock."

"I shall keep that in mind, Captain," Hast responded, his icy stare matching the intensity Xhaxin displayed. After a moment, Hast turned on his heel and headed for the turbolift. "What I'd like you to keep in mind is that I'm your lifeline to the Alliance; I also have the power to have your letter of marque revoked," the observer called over his shoulder. "Just so we understand each other ... Captain."

As the turbolift doors closed, Xhaxin sat silently gazing at space as the bridge busied itself making ready to set out. He heard stations reporting in and noted his crew working smartly, a colorful bejeweled blur of activity with himself as its gray heart. He absently played with a pair of gold credit coins as he brooded. Mistik Arka, the Quarren technician, quickly installed the Alliance communication console, tested it with a brief transmission, and reported it functioning properly.

"Captain, all stations report ready. The Alliance ship has jumped. The *Free Lance* is at your command," reported Khwir, his First Mate.

"Plot a course for Medth," Xhaxin replied, a feral grin on his face. "Prepare for the jump to lightspeed. Let's not keep the Empire waiting."

Entering 'The Life'

"How'd I get started raidin'? Easy question, grubber. I was a navigator on a system-hopper, just a small-time operator, trading along the Shwuy Perimeter and in Parmic sector. Bad times. Hardly any trade flowing. The Empire's taxes made living next to impossible, though that idiot Moff Balfour made smuggling an easy option. I mean, it ain't like he actually knew what he was doing, right?"

"Well, me and my crew fell short too many times; smugglers were thick as bog-ticks in those days, mostly because it was easy to get away with it. So we made up for the shortfall in profits by the occasional dirtside raid."

"Not regular, of course. Or maliciously. We only took from them who had more."

"Easy. Until we got caught by an Imperial patrol. So we ran."

"I drifted for a while, but the Imps got our transponder code, and that put me on the sector 'Detain For Questioning' list. I couldn't find any straight work after my name went public, so I signed on as a navigator for a pirate ship. When that group fell apart — they do that after a while — I signed aboard another. Then another. Got to be my regular career."

"Sure, I'm tired of it. And you probably think I never should've started 'the Life.'"

"But I don't answer to anybody except my captain and my mates. And they hold themselves accountable to me. Maybe I should've done something more 'civilized,' but I'm flamin' glad I didn't."

— Attributed to a member of the
Khuiumiin Survivors

"Are you sure of your information?" Hast asked.

"No," replied Xhaxin. "I am simply following a lead."

"A lead given by a disloyal Induparan with a grudge against his king," Hast growled, clearly unhappy with the situation.

The bridge crew tensed, expecting another argument in a seemingly unending stream of conflict that began when Hast became the *Free Lance's* Alliance observer.

Xhaxin turned to face Hast. "I am always willing to listen to the advice of my crew, Hast. Remember that ... if you are ever considered a member of my crew," he said, his voice as brittle as Camarian crystal.

The *Free Lance* was lurking just inside the jump zone of the Ec Pand system, waiting for the arrival of a target vessel. The jump zone was designated not by a beacon-buoy (as is common in more civilized systems), but by a fairly large asteroid that had been towed to the area by the local government. Any ship travelling into the system calculated a jump to these coordinates and proceeded to Ec Pand itself, a modest gem in the Induparan Crown Worlds.

"Mass alert, Captain," announced the sensor operator, a young Corellian named Kett. "We've got a ship dropping into realspace."

"Marvelous," muttered Hast. This was the third ship arrival since they'd begun waiting, and the Alliance observer doubted very much that they could linger much more without a patrol vessel investigating their presence.

The new arrival—a corvette—dropped to sublight speed directly in front of the *Free Lance*, on a collision course with the marker asteroid. The corvette veered sharply off her course, coming within meters of the asteroid

... and a fiery collision.

"Idiot navigator. Good pilot, though," observed Xhaxin.

"Transponder code confirmed. That's the *Indupar Nova*," Kett reported.

"Keep on her, boy. Helm, proceed at full sublight speed. All right, the *Nova* will be too busy correcting her navigator's error for the next minute or so. On my mark, communication station is to broadcast Code Quasar. Sensors: begin jamming. Tactical: raise shields and prepare to fire ion cannons. Standby the tractor beams and boarding shuttle; they will deploy at mark plus thirty seconds." Xhaxin said, his voice hard as he issued the clipped orders at his crew.

The *Free Lance* bore down on the corvette.

"Mark!"

The bridge exploded into intense activity. A burst of ionic blasts spat across the gap of space as the *Free Lance's* shields snapped invisibly into place. The corvette shuddered under the assault, waves of energy flowed along her hull, and she began to list to starboard. As the ionic disruption faded, the target vessel's engines flared to life.

"She's powering up engines and raising her shields, Cap'n," reported Kett. "Looks like she's making a run for it."

"It appears the *Nova's* captain isn't terribly bright, either. Deploy the shuttle and ready my launch. Main ion cannons: fire!"

Another ionic barrage leapt through space, and the corvette's shields flared brightly as they overloaded and the engines shut down. The prize yawed in space.

Xhaxin stood from his command chair, and flashed a feral grin at his crew. "Well done, lads," he said. "It looks like it is time to pay that fool captain a visit, eh?"

Missa waited nervously as the pirate captain, Xhaxin, debated something with another man, this one wearing a Rebel Alliance insignia. The prisoners — arrayed in a ragged line along the portside bulkhead — were fidgeting under the watchful eyes of the pirate boarders.

Missa's eyes were drawn to the sign above the nearby hatch: "Airlock," it read. *And we're just lining up in front of it, she thought. This is not good. Could it be that pirate, Xhaxin, is debating who to throw out of the airlock first?*

One of the pirates, a fat Gamorrean, waddled up to Missa and snorted at her. This close she could smell his pungent odor — a rancid scent that reminded her of swamp gas and decaying food — and saw three small, sluglike parasites nestled against the alien's skin. He reached out for her with pudgy three-fingered hands. Missa shrank away, unable to scream. The Gamorrean grasped her throat, and began to tighten his grip —

"Gorug!" Xhaxin's voice slammed down the corridor.

The Gamorrean froze.

"I've warned you about accosting the prisoners. Twice." The pirate captain's eyes flashed angrily as he marched closer, facing the Gamorrean.

Gorug released Missa, and backed up, grunting and growling angrily. The other pirates backed away, though their weapons were still at the ready and — despite the distraction — their attention was fixed firmly on the prisoners.

"I don't care how much your matron would like that woman's jewels! Ship's articles are very clear: *you don't rob the prisoners*. No one shares out until the committee divides the loot up." Xhaxin snapped in a clear, commanding voice. He paused, his eyes narrowing into hard, dangerous slits. "But you already know that, don't you? Perhaps you forgot ... or perhaps you are merely a fool."

Gorug's eyes narrowed in turn and he issued a series of grunts and snorts. Even Missa — who had never seen a Gamorrean before — could tell that Gorug had just issued a dangerous ultimatum.

"Do you think you can take me this time? How

many times do I have to thrash you to convince you that *I am in command of this crew?*"

With a roar that filled the corridor, Gorug charged.

Xhaxin nimbly rotated out of the way, allowing Gorug's momentum to carry him into a bulkhead. The Gamorrean rebounded off the wall, stunned. Xhaxin reached out, spun Gorug around, tripped him, and pinned him on his back. Xhaxin pulled out a vibrodagger and laid it against Gorug's throat. *If Xhaxin activates the weapon, Missa thought, alarm tingling her internal dialogue, that ... thing ... is dead.*

"One more time, Gorug. Once more, and you walk the lock." Xhaxin hissed. Standing abruptly, he spun to face the line of prisoners.

Xhaxin gave a slight bow to Missa. "My apologies, my lady."

He turned his head left. "Officers of the *Indupar Nova*: you are prisoners of the Alliance and will be held on board the *Free Lance* until you can be turned over to the proper authorities. The *Indupar Nova* is seized as a prize of war. Passengers: you will be released in lifeboats." Relief washed over Missa.

"But not you two," he added gesturing at Missa and the woman standing at her side, dressed in the modest clothing of a House Indupar lady-in-waiting. "You, Lady Kalena, are a noble of House Indupar, and covered under our letter of marque. You will be assigned quarters and be held in comfort as long as you behave. Give me trouble, and I'll put you in the brig."

"At least release my maid, Missa," Missa said, gesturing at the "serving girl." The two — Missa and Lady Kalena — had switched identities for this very reason, reasoning that any pirates foolish enough to attack the *Nova* would fall for the ruse.

He regarded her with ice-blue eyes for a long minute. "I'm afraid not. She'll be good company for you. Besides, you'll need someone to dress you and do your hair."

He turned as if to leave, pausing only to call back over his shoulder:

"Besides, your House's rivals will likely pay us something extra for a holoivid of Lady Kalena dressed as a servant girl. For a laugh, you understand."

With a chuckle, Xhaxin swept past the prisoners and headed back to the *Free Lance*.

To: Fleet Admiral Gor Lequar, Third Ado Superiority Fleet
From: Governor Mirash Peet, Indupar
Re: Pirate attacks

Admiral,

I must urgently request that the escort force in the Indupar Crown Worlds be augmented to reflect the increase in pirate attacks on Imperial and Induparan shipping. Although Commodore Soleric been of great assistance and highly cooperative in his efforts to suppress this piracy, and the Induparan Crown Defense Force has cooperated in every way, we simply lack the ships to mount an effective defense against these ongoing raids.

Indupar has in the past been fortunate to escape Rebel activity, but recent events demonstrate that this may have changed. Recently, reports of a Rebel pirate, calling himself Xhaxin, have come to my attention. It is my concern that this pirate is only the beginning of a larger Rebel operation in the area, particularly given the ... destabilizing effect his recent raids have had among the elder Induparan political houses. It is precisely this political element to Xhaxin's raid that indicates Rebel interest. More ships, intelligence agents, and Sector Ranger support are needed to suppress this threat to the Empire.

In service to the Emperor,



Governor Mirash Peet, Indupar
cc: Moff Stavveld, High Admiral Markand, Induparan Prefecture, Commodore Soleric, King Dahon Indupar, Indupar charter companies

To: Governor Peet, Indupar
From: Moff Irnst Stavveld
Re: Pirate attacks

Governor,

I received a copy of your memorandum to Admiral Lequar and read it with great interest. I have conferred with my staff, and the Ado sector Admiralty, COMPNOR and Imperial Intelligence and while we are concerned about the increase in piracy and the possibility of increased Rebel activity in the area, we are not currently able to transfer any ships to Soleric's command.

However, your area has been moved up on the priority assignment list for new ships as they come off the shipyard lines. I am assured that Soleric will have a new line of ships within a year, and that his 16th Escort Force can be brought up to standard OB strength within five years.

In the meantime, I am instructing Sector Ranger Central Command to detail an additional patrol to the area.

On a personal note, sir, I would recommend that you calm yourself; I am more than aware of the political situation in the Indupar Crown Worlds. The mere existence of a holopic featuring Lady Kalena in a servant girl outfit — while embarrassing to the Induparan elder houses — is cause for minor concern, but it hardly spells doom for the Empire.

Think, preferably prior to submitting alarmist reports to your superiors.

In service to the Emperor,



Moff Irnst Stavveld
cc: High Admiral Markand, Admiral Gor Lequar, Induparan Prefecture, Commodore Soleric, Coalition for Progress Commerce, IOCI, ISB

Justice and Mercy

"Joha Marik, you have been found guilty of 102 counts of piracy, 12 counts of aggression against Imperial personnel, and assorted lesser crimes too numerous to list before this court. Prior to your sentencing, do you have anything to say in response to these charges?" The magistrate glowered over the bench at Marik.

"You never would've caught me if it hadn't been for those Rebels and that asteroid-grub, Xhaxin!" Marik snarled.

"Is that so? I must admit, Marik, that I'm curious about that. If you explain, perhaps I'll reduce your sentence. Why did Xhaxin turn on you? I'm sure that the famous 'honor code' of pirates like yourself can be dispensed with, just this once," the magistrate sneered, hands folded in front of him, as if the mere presence of the pirate made him feel soiled.

"Sure, why not? I wanted to recruit him back from those thrice-blasted Rebels, but Xhaxin said he knew 'zactly what he was doing. Something about the meaning of his life. He wanted *me* to join the Rebels, if you can imagine. But even they never really took him on, except as a flunky," Marik said, a sour look crossing his face as he added, "and the flamin' idiot doesn't realize it."

"But why not kill you? Why arrange for your capture?" The magistrate's computer-augmented voice echoed ominously around the judgement chamber.

"He said it was justice. Justice for him to work off his debts. Justice for me to be punished. As for where he is now, I'd guess he's at StarForge Station. That's one of his main ports of call."

"I see. Very well, I sentence you to immediate execution."

"*What?* I thought you said you was reducin' my sentence!" Marik's eyes blazed with fear, as he struggled against his manacles in panic.

"I did reduce your sentence, Marik," the Imperial magistrate said, his voice soft and dangerous, like shimmersilk and Malkite poison. "I had intended to sentence you to life at hard labor in the Kessel spice mines. As far as the Empire is concerned, you are getting off easy."

Hast made his way along the *Free Lance*'s corridors, exploring the ship and familiarizing himself with crew faces, while carefully keeping out of the raiders' way. The *Lance* was a heavily modified Nebulon-B frigate, not unlike a medical frigate he served aboard once, but different enough to be worth investigation.

Hast had already studied the ship's technical specs. Weapons included a mix of firepower from heavy turbolasers to light ion cannons. The deflectors were souped up, and the hull reinforced with struts, extra armor plating, and additional particle shielding. The engineering boom was reinforced by an armored sleeve that should be able to take a hit or two from a Star Destroyer. The ship carried a pair of small assault shuttles in the converted flight bays; a private launch, presumably for inconspicuous visits to port, was also prepped for immediate takeoff.

His explorations held a few surprises. The ship's life support was comfortable everywhere except the shuttle bay (where any excess heat tended to bleed into space). The medical suite was larger than expected, run by a physician, and featured a full compliment of medical droids and three bacta tanks. *That makes sense*, Hast thought. *Raids likely take a high toll from the crew.*

The crew quarters themselves were small but comfortable. The galley seemed to be endlessly stocked with fresh food (not the reconstituted slop most Rebel crews — or Imperial crews, for that matter — were forced to endure). Hast snorted with disgust: fresh supplies were good for morale, but expensive and hard to find. They'd have to restock far too often. *A foolish extravagance*, he thought. *One that might get us killed later on.*

The crew was not what he'd expected, either. A mix of species you'd never find on any Imperial ship, and perhaps not even on an Alliance ship. Imperials wouldn't allow non-humans to serve in their military, and the Alliance crews were largely comprised of species of the same origin. Pirate ships had to be mixed, Hast supposed, for lack of options. Seemed to work too. Aqualish took orders from Quarren, and Gamorreans ate with humans ... and seemed satisfied — even *happy* — to do so.

Nor was the ship or crew as shoddy as he had feared. True, they were rough and given to excess in their personal lives, but when it came to doing the job, professionalism was the watchword of the day. Except for the life support and galley excesses, this was as trim a ship as he'd seen.

Keying in his encryption code on his datapad, Hast made his first entry in the observer's log:

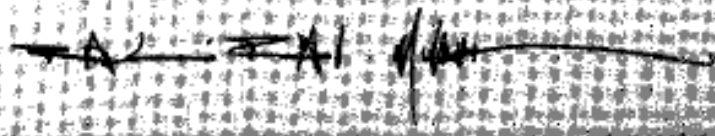
"Hast: Alliance privateer observer, access GL-4. Upon initial examination, one conclusion about this assignment can be made immediately: this is going to be a very interesting tour ... "

From: Rai'Rai Muvunc, Alliance High Command
To: Moris Malvarra
Re: Request for transfer

Malvarra, I must refuse your request to transfer from your current post observing the privateer Dharus. Your tour is not yet one-third over, and your reasons for requesting transfer are inadequate. Never fear: they treated their first three observers much, *much* worse. You are in excellent company in requesting your transfer — nearly every other observer assigned had made the same request. However, none of Dharus' antics have proven fatal yet, so relax and remind yourself of your duty.

Incidentally, you need not worry that we will hold you responsible for Dharus' actions. We never do. You may feel comforted, I hope, in knowing he has repeatedly faced inquiry into his escapades and we have never found sufficient cause to revoke his letter.

Good hunting.



Galaxy Guide #10

"... Hers was a tale of ancient lineage.

"A story older than the suns.

"Hers was the tale of the Empire's hired gun who comes to dine with blood soaked hands and frosted smile like honey wine, transfixing like the serpent before it strikes with equal compassion ..."

— Thalos Lorin,
Serpent Rain, Act II, Scene I

Ya Never Can Tell ...

"Jarmak used to say that a real friend was someone who'd draw his pistol and walk down a dark alley with you if you ask 'im to. Well, one night Jarmak asked just such a friend to do just such a thing, and sure 'nough, they walked down that long alley together and ended up killing five of the Prefect's best Imperial thugs in the process.

"And after it was all over and Jarmak held out his hand in friendship, this friend ups and slaps a magnacuff on it and turns him over to the Imperial Prefect for a hundred credits and a second class berth on a third-rate tramp freighter. Just goes to show ya never can tell."

— Gaor Tembon
Smuggler, slaver, thief

Let the Guild hereafter be unto you as your mother and father.

Let this house stand with you as a friend in need.

Let this home forever take pride in you as a lover who delights in your prowess.

Those who bore you may betray the Empire tomorrow.

He who in friendship stands by your side may slide the blade in all the easier.

She who shares your sleep may seek to strangle you in it.

After all forsake you, only your Guild shall remain to fortify and protect you.

Only your Guild understands exactly who and what you are, and dares to care about you just the same.

— From *The Foundation Creed*
Salaktori Hunter Guild

Termination With Extreme Prejudice

"Boy, there are two types of acquisitions in the galaxy. Those who stare face down the muzzle of a blaster with calm and whatcha call it ... dignity, yeah, dignity. And then there are those who beg and squirm and squeal their little hearts out, on and on likes, 'til you finally just up an' pull the trigger just ta shut 'em up.

"Well, Philo always was a bit of a slimy, weak-livered type, and we'd long decided, Raxine and me, we wasn't going to bother to take him still breathin'. We'd done this hunt together, but the credits didn't split none too evenly two ways, so Raxine decides we should settle it by grabbing ole Philo by the legs and make a wish-like and the winner take the larger share! With all the screamin' and whinin' and pleadin', Raxine gets tired of it and pops him one with that little pint-sized blaster of hers ..."

"Would that blaster have happened to look anything like this?"

"Ah, yeah, now that you mention it ... say, where did you ever ..."

In the confines of the small, enclosed tavern, the crackle from the blaster's muzzle was

almost deafening. The resulting hole in Krestock's body, a third of a meter in diameter, was matched by a similar hole in the high-backed leather chair his lifeless body now slumped against.

"Krestock, you bleedin' slime. Philo was my brother. There was no bounty on Philo, do you hear me, Krestock, *no bounty!* It had all been a mistake. A lousy, bleedin' clerical error! But you and that witch of yours never bothered to check the latest Intel Updates. Oh, no. If you had, you would have known the bounty had been rescinded. You had a bleedin' link direct to Enforcement Central, and you never bothered to use it ..."

Gingerly poking through the charred remains, Reglis located Krestock's pouch of credits. Reglis paused for one last consideration.

"By the way Krestock, like the man says, there are two types of hunters in this galaxy: those who talk and those who shoot. Hope you remember that in the next life ..."

— Reglis Taal,
Endings And Beginnings: An Autobiography

Specially Qualified

"Come in, hunter Rill. Do sit down."

"Thank you, Governor. To what do I owe this honor?"

"As an Imperial bounty hunter of no small reputation, you have come to my attention by way of recommendation of Sener in the ISB. I have a particularly delicate problem on my hands, one for which I need a woman of your special abilities."

"You flatter me, Governor."

"Not at all. I am merely stating the obvious. I have recently uncovered incontrovertible evidence that points to the presence of a large underground Rebel network in the city. These individuals are commanded by a very special Rebel agitator and organizer. One whose past actions have proven his treason a hundred times over, but one who, until now, we have been

unable to identify ... I shall not bore you with unnecessary details. Suffice it to say that through a slight miscalculation, the Rebel underground leader has allowed us to, at long last, uncover his identity. That is where you come in, hunter Rill. I want someone of your unique station to go in and bring out this individual. Any questions?"

"For now, just one, governor. I'll need to know how old this Rebel leader is."

"Hmmm, let me see. Ah yes, here it is ... your father is 47 standard years of age ... do you have any other questions, hunter Rill?"

"No. Thank you, Governor."

"Then I can expect you to begin immediately."

"Of course, Governor, immediately."

Buyer's Market

"Secretary Greal, bring in that list of bounty hunters I asked you to prepare for me."

"Sir, I know you have a clear preference for Imperial hunters, but the current situation might require the use of guild or independent hunters. Upon investigation, I have determined that there are presently four different hunters available for contract in Feris City at the present time. They are as follows:

"First, there is Saulis Pau. He is an Imperial hunter, ex-Imperial army, serviced out after severe combat injuries required extensive cybernetic replacements. While not suitable for front-line duty anymore, he maintains a high proficiency with numerous weapon types and explosives. Equally important, he is one who can act with a degree of discretion. It was Pau who did that little 'favor' for Governor Heas last month. Reliable and someone who knows how to keep his mouth shut.

"Second is Lafek Iss, a member of the House Salaktori guild. A master electronics and computer expert, with additional cross-training in

droid programming and anti-surveillance measures. He has a reputation for secrecy and prefers to work alone.

"Next, Jasis Temm, former owner and CEO of Hadress Defense Systems, Ltd., on Hadress. A mechanical engineer and security consultant to Prefect Ilanda. He sold the company two years ago for 4.6 billion credits and now prefers to apply his knowledge in more 'practical' ways.

"Finally, there is Quantana. He started out as a kid from the streets of Lopor Station. He seems to have a strong sense of family and loyalty: he uses his funds to support an extended family with a history of medical problems. Smart, cool under pressure. Never lost an 'acquisition' yet."

"Thank you, Secretary Greal. In light of the way our competition has been pressuring us of late, I believe we will have need of all these individuals. See to it that the next batch of bounties is duly registered soon as possible. It's time I became an equal opportunity employer."

"Like they say, in this Empire you're either part of the solution or most likely the cause of the problem ..."

— Yarr Gatonne

Do You Take This Man Hunter

How lovely my darling Zira looks today and what a coup I'm bringing in on her dowry ...

"We have assembled here today ..."

... once I get hold of her fortune, I can use it to corner the hueris traffic in this entire sector.

"... concerning this man and this woman ..."

She looks positively radiant. And what a gorgeous wedding outfit. Pretty big if you ask me, though; you could hide a grenade launcher under all those folds ...

"Do you, My Lord, now take ..."

"... yeah, yeah, sure, sure ..."

... I don't remember those flowers over there ...

"... And do you, My Lady, take ..."

... what's that snaking out from behind those two tall vases ...

"... by the power invested in me I now pronounce you ..."

... it's a blaster muzzle, I'd swear it!

"Get down darling!"

Blaster fire! The podium blown away! Get

those skirts out of my way ... there he is ...

"... you missed, do you hear me, and I'll not give you another chance ... try to gun me down at my own wedding will you ... dirty, stinking bounty hunter scum!"

"There my darling, it's all right. We got the stinking bounty hunter. Let me help you up. I think ..."

Click!

"Wha ... where did you get those cuffs? Take these off me immediately. I don't understand, darling, darling, where did you get that blaster, I don't under—"

"Do be quiet now, my sweet, and do come along quietly."

"But Zira, I don't ..."

"The name's Zardra, not Zira. By the way, thanks for taking out the competition for me. Now move it, buster! You're worth 50,000 credits to me and I aim to collect! Oh, I guess you'll be wanting your ring back now ..."

You Never Can Tell

"... yeah, I swore I'd never risk running up against Zaglis and his NFP goons again — not enough profit margin in it — but the way it happened was like this ...

"Cyrstas Eloinie, the daughter of Darred Eloinie, CEO of Eloinie Petro-Munitions on Zaraksander, she finds herself in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Neo-Fundamentalist Phlangites who nabbed her had no way of knowing she was demonstrating for their side during that Peaceful Dawn Rally! They snatched her right and proper, no fuss, no muss, and the next thing he knows, old Darred is being hit up for 100,000 credits and a munitions factory on the southern continent. Now it seems that he didn't want to part with either one, but having his 18-year-old daughter all shot up wouldn't make for a good corporate image! So, the next thing I know, one of his pet flunkies comes round with 30,000 credits tucked in his pocket. Three hours later, I'm back in the Fioer desert, going after the same bunch I'd just escaped from after bringing in their Supreme Leader ... yesterday! And the really lousy part of it all is that they know I'm coming and they're ready for me. Now, I ask you, is this a crazy way to make a living or what ..."

— Extract from Valken Gresh,
Great Hunts I've Lived To Tell About

Sore Loser

The view from Governor Desh's office was simply magnificent. In the darkness just before dawn, a rainbow of multi-colored lights emanated from the starport below. Beyond Desh's ceiling-high blast-proof windows, dozens of cargo ships, shuttles, and personal transports touched down, took off, or drifted lazily on their way. Inside the spacious quarters, the governor and a Devaronian merchant sat, neither one noticing the splendid view.

Each was focused completely on the electronic cards each held in their hands. Between them, several large stacks of Imperial credits, cash vouchers and coins from a dozen different planets covered the green ceramic table. The majority of them were on the side of the table belonging to the alien called Ulicx.

Governor Desh, his uniform collar unbuttoned and the rich silk cravat beneath lined with sweat, noted that some of the credits at Ulicx's side had fallen unnoticed to the plush carpeting below. Piles of *his* credits ...

I do so dislike a careless winner ...

"It is, as they say, Ulicx, your play ..."

"Keep your shirt on, your Lordship. Then again, start taking it off ... read 'em and weep. A perfect pyramid with clusters! Top that, Gov!"

Desh placed his cards face down on the table in silent acknowledgment of one last, humiliating defeat. It was getting very irritating to always lose to this trader. Just once, just once, he wished he had the final winning hand.

The Devaronian smiled a smug grin, his sharp teeth gleaming. "Better luck next week, Gov. Hey, don't be so glum; I'll always give you a rematch. Look at it this way — sakresh lessons are expensive, especially when you lose to the very best! Hey, see 'ya around Deshy ..."

For the space of several minutes, Governor Desh stood by the high windows, staring blankly out at the vista unfolding before him. Only the occasional grinding of teeth marked the anger he felt as he imagined Ulicx back at his ship, enjoying himself, at his expense ... at his expense!

Governor Desh touched the comlink on his left wrist twice. His assistant would be coming on duty right about now.

"Prefect Wann, do come in and bring your datapad with you. Prefect, what time is the merchant Ulicx due to lift off from Dentani Starport?"

Wann entered through the broad, nova crystal-studded doors, furiously tapping away on his datapad. Before he reached the governor he responded, "Ulicx is due to depart in exactly 2.1 standard hours, sir. May I inquire why ..."

"Prefect Wann, precisely 2.15 hours from now, you will issue, under my authority, a bounty for the arrest of one Ulicx Vinaq, on the charge of illegal possession and transportation of restricted weapons. Addenda to all local posting agencies within three hours from now. Is that understood?"

"Certainly Governor, but, may I inquire, do we have proof of the merchant's guilt on hand?"

Desh walked back to his desk and opened a locked compartment. He withdrew a small blaster and tossed it to his aide, who caught it with one hand.

"We do now, Prefect Wann ..."

As his assistant noiselessly departed, Governor Desh returned to his view of the starport below. He could almost imagine Ulicx out there, somewhere, spending his credits. He reflected that some lessons were indeed expensive to learn ...

"The hunt's the thing that makes us what we are. It is our life's blood, our salvation and our damnation. Nothing else has more importance. Nothing else holds out so much pleasure. Nothing else would cause us to risk our lives year after year. Damn, but we love it so ..."

— Reglis Taal

What's In A Name

"Now I admit Matagorn was a jerk, and none of us shed many tears over his sudden departure, but the way it happened, well ... why couldn't he just keep his bloody mouth shut?"

"We all know what Prefect Ursellis was like before Tremayne made LAACDocs a way of life. These handy-dandy incarceration tickets just gave her the *carte blanche* she'd been looking for to settle a few old scores and pack away a few folks indefinitely. So the next thing you know, as the sub-prefect in charge of all the datapushing, Matagorn is up to his eyeballs in work, moaning and complaining about lost vacation time, long hours, and having to deal with that Srrors'tok bounty hunter Cex!"

"Now, if he'd just kept his mouth shut he would finally have gotten to enjoy that vacation he was so worked up about. But not Mat! Instead, he just couldn't resist using that legendary Matagorn wit of his at someone else's expense. Last month, Tyionsis Cex makes planetfall and comes in after dropping off his latest batch of Imperial 'detainees' to the Prefect's tender, loving care. As luck would have it, he runs into Matagorn, and Mat's all frazzled from writing up the newest bunch of LAACDocs. Mat, he decides he's not going to hand them over without some crack at Cex's expense. So he hands the hunter the Prefect's latest hit list — there must have been a hundred of them — and goes and makes a cut about how, given these are what you'd call 'LAACDocs' how that must make Cex High Inquisitor Tremayne's personal 'LAACkey!'"

"And the idiot really gets a good chortle out of it! Now Cex, he never says a word, never lifts a finger, but I could see the fur on the back of

his pelt bristling. Cex, he just turns around, nice and slow, and looks Matagorn up and down a couple of times, like he was sizing him up for a new coffin! Then his lips parted, showing off those huge fangs of his — I guess that was his version of a smile. I saw his eyes when he did that — those cold, yellow cat-slit eyes. I don't mind telling you it was enough to make my blood run cold. Next thing anyone knows, Cex points a single clawed finger at Matagorn as if to say, 'You just made a big mistake!' Then, he turns around and walks off. I knew Matagorn was a walking dead man, right then and there.

"Anyway, Cex leaves, and the next day Matagorn suddenly gets word he's been okayed for that damn vacation he's been scratching about for months! Two days later, he disappears. The day after, a piece of him is located over in Gevis City, the next day one in Verdson, the next ... well, you get the idea.

"Now mind you, I'm not saying that Cex did it! My mother didn't raise no fool, no sir! Leastwise, no one ever accused him of disappearing Matagorn, and the Prefect, she could care less over the loss of a whining flunky or two, but I knows what I knows. Matagorn, he finally got that vacation he wanted so bad — a really long vacation — and Cex, well, let's just say no one ever made a crack about him being any one's lackey ever again ..."

— Extract, Helkson Vall,
Sub-Prefect, Kalandis IV, Pallis Sector
Confidential meeting with
Intel Agent 438432

"... the face value of a given bounty is the least important factor in the selection process. The key to any successful hunt lies in the selection of the proper target."

— Tyrn Jiton

This Guy Just Doesn't Care

"I only saw Boba Fett once, and that was when I was serving as Governor Isis' adjutant. One morning, he kicks in the door of the governor's office, dragging behind him the pirate Feldrall, minus an arm. Now Governor Isis is thrilled to death, despite the very unseemly interruption, given that Feldrall had been plaguing Imperial shipping in the sector for years ...

"Anyway, the governor accesses her console to look up the price on Feldrall when Boba Fett announces that he wants 100,000 credits!

"The governor confirms that Feldrall's bounty is only 50,000 and politely says as much.

"Boba Fett just looks at her and the next thing we know, he pulls out some sort of thermal detonator. Before anyone can think, he activates it, right there in the Governor's own office, not three meters from where we're standing. '100,000,' he says. Just that, nothing more.

"Well the governor, she's nobody's fool and I know for a fact she had two bodyguard droids hidden behind the false monitor screens, their fingers on the contacts, just waiting for the order to blast him to atoms. And I gotta figure Boba Fett knew it too. 'You don't seriously expect me to pay you twice what that man is worth, do you?' she asks.

"The rest of us are watching the warning indicator go from green to amber as she says it. '120,000,' is all he says.

"The governor says, 'Surely you realize if that device you're holding goes off, none of us will live. Are you aware that I could have you arrested for what you are attempting?'

"Meanwhile we're all standing around statue-like, watching the light go from amber to blinking red. '150,000,' is all Fett says. The guards are starting to slowly backpedal. It didn't matter that they couldn't get out of blast range. All the while, the Governor and Fett are staring at each other. No one is daring to breathe. All we can see is that light pulsing red and all we can hear is our hearts in our throats, not knowing how many seconds we have left.

"Fett knew he would be killed if Isis decided to call his bluff. He knew she could try and arrest him if any of us survived. He just didn't care! Somewhere between insanity and eternity, the Governor must have come to the same conclusion because she finally says, 'Very well, I'll issue a voucher for 150,000 credits.'

"Fett disengages the device, throws down Feldrall, takes the datacard and walks out without so much as a nod. That afternoon I requested reassignment to the navy and I've been happy here ever since. The way I figure it, anywhere out here's got to be safer than being around that guy."

— Testimony from Reagal Eron
Chief Gunnery Officer, *ISD Eradicator*.

*"For want of a screw a droid was lost,
For want of a droid a sensor failed,
For want of a sensor a power cell died,
For want of a power cell a blaster malfunctioned,
For want of a blaster I captured Gavron Noff.
Data evaluation and conclusion: Gavron Noff
screwed up ..."*

— Armx, epitaph for acquisition Gavron Noff

Makin' It Happen

"Hey, Moxin, sweetheart, baby! How's the hunt? Hey, I just got the receipts on that Tellas Lordin job you brought in and let me be the first to say that was a smooth op — I mean *smoooooth* like a cloudsnake's carapace. Really went far to impress Prefect Adrona, I can tell you."

"Listen Moxi', I got her sweetness to extend the renewal of your Sector Permit for another year for only another 300 credits — can you believe it? Yeah, she really grav'd on that case of Hestrian wine you gave me ... sure, I know that was a gift just between you and me, but hey, no sacrifice is too good for my main man, 'ya know what I mean?"

"... Moxi', I got a good deal on some LAACDocs if you feel like pickin' up some loose change over in Demetras Sector. Sure, I know it's a bit of a hop, but I got this guy on Bellis IV who has a supply transport and he owes me a favor; one comm and I can fix it up. I figure you can pocket a few creds and then resupply at no cost, be back here in five days, and we split the take down the middle."

"... I heard from Gamorrean Interstellar. If you're still interested, they'll sell us the min-

ing rights on Quiberon V for a streak'in 500,000, 10 percent down and we neg them for the rest over 10 standard. Thanks. Hey do I come through for 'ya or what?"

"Before I forget. I found out that Beyla Rus has a lodge planned on the far side of Jweab VII. If you could find your way clear to be in the vicinity in say, five days, I know a little lady who plans to be meeting your acquaintance just about that time ... hey, do I ask you about *your* sources?"

"Anyway, no we don't have a bounty on him, but I know this guy over in Vex City who'll ship him back to Seswenna Sector for next to nothing and I figure we can get 10,000 for him if you're interested. You know, underground stuff. Well, think about it and let me know ..."

"Yeah, listen, it's been sweet, but I got another vid comin' in. Think about that Bellis IV thing and let me know. 'Til later, and watch your back. Can't let one of my best guys get himself into trouble, you know?"

"... Hey! Boba! Buddy, baby ..."

— Extract of conversation recorded from the offices of Minas Derel, Licensed Expedito, Othon City, Pirin, Locris Sector

Almost Had 'Im

"We call Renlo old 'Solo's Bane'! Seems that he marched in here last year and announced to all and sundry that *he* was going to be the one to capture the infamous Han Solo. Seems he spent his last credit on outfitting his ship with all the latest gear — the best tech credits could buy, including a few secret 'black box' type thingamajigs to hear him tell it. Oh, and he went and found himself a handful of private instructors to, according to him, *reeeaally* give him an edge, so to speak. So he buys a full night's drinks for everyone and off he goes.

"Fifteen months later, he's back with 'nay but the torn and bloodied tunic on his back. He'd lost his ship, gotten all his pretty toys

smashed up one by one, and he found his 'edge' wasn't quite as keen as he thought it was. That's him over in the corner, sweeping up glass and mutterin' to himself, 'Almost had 'im,' over and over again, night and day. Poor old Renlo. Poor stupid Renlo.

"Technology doesn't make a hunter. It's brains, and guts, and the willingness to spill some of both — yours and the other guy's — that does it. Start with those commodities and, with a little luck and a lot of common sense, you won't overmatch yourself and wind up like old Solo's Bane!"

— Conversation with an anonymous hunter, "Arc of Fire" Bar & Grill, Selenius VII

"Our stock in trade is sapient life — we track it, capture it, and, if absolutely necessary, disintegrate it. It's a dirty job but I figure someone has to get rich doing it, and one way or the other, that someone is going to be me."

— Zardra

"Once a hunter, always the hunter ..."

— Traditional hunter saying

Guild Justice

The open-air courtyard of House Paramexor was crowded to overflowing. In the center of the huge amphitheater, two solitary figures waited for the roar of the crowd to dissipate. Their attention was directed to a small box, bedecked with the orange and green banner of the Paramexor Guild of Hunters. In that box sat five Humans: three female, two male. The oldest male, Janq Paramexor, sat in his mobile support unit, his rich furs wrapped around him. He was chilled despite the warmth of the summer's day on Denevar. To his left sat his consort, Kaith, her cybernetic right hand clenched tightly around her cup, the only sign of her present agitation. To his right sat Moff Gorliz, his ten ringed fingers flaunting his extensive wealth. The fingers tapped nervously, as the Moff pondered his role in these proceedings: to act as the Emperor's eyes and ears in the spectacle about to unfold. Behind them sat two guild members, drawn at random, to complete the assembled tribunal.

Janq Paramexor, having had the charges against Reson Nath read aloud for all to hear, let the crowd howl for a full two minutes more before silencing the conclave of hunters with the motion of a single finger. His voice, amplified by the microphones in his support unit, thundered with a clarity and strength that belied his many years.

"Reson Nath, you have heard the charges brought against you by Prefect Adar, who stands before you now. He has alleged that you did willingly give aid to a wanted man, a known felon, and one responsible for crimes against the person of the Prefect himself. How do you now plead?"

Reson Nath, her legs planted firmly in the

hot sand, shook her head with a theatrical wave of defiance. She met the prefect's gaze and let forth a peal of contemptuous laughter.

"Not guilty!"

Amidst the renewed shouts and clamor, above the din of a thousand spectators, Prefect Adar spat in the sand at Nath's feet and shouted his defiance in turn.

"My Lord Gorliz, surely you will not permit the Emperor's authority to be so cavalierly defied! You have seen the evidence I have laid before you. This person is clearly in defiance of Imperial law."

Gorliz's stare betrayed no emotion. "Perhaps, Prefect, perhaps ... and yet it is guild law that concerns us here today."

"Reson Nath," Paramexor interjected, cutting off the Prefect's renewed tirade in mid-bellow, "You have heard the charges presented, what is your defense in these matters?"

"Noble Guild Master, my defense is but the truth itself, no more and no less. All here know of my reputation for scrupulously avoiding any semblance of falsehood." Pausing to allow for the inevitable laughter from the crowd, she continued, "I supported no criminal. I merely bought information from a man whom I knew to be a reliable source in the lawful pursuit of an acquisition assigned me by my coordinator. I cannot be held responsible if that individual, after receiving payment from me, should choose to use those funds to purchase passage off-world to avoid prosecution for a crime I knew nothing about. That said informer should just happen to be a cousin of the Prefect who stands sweating here before you, what is that to me? I may plead guilty to

the stealing of a kiss in the performance of my assigned duties, but how was I to know that the 'crime' the Prefect speaks of here was the youth's willful flight to avoid being sent to university off-world, far away from his present lover, or that the credits paid for good information — information which by the way aided me in the successful capture of my target — would finance the elopement of the young couple, far from the Prefect's present jurisdiction? I am, after all, innocent ... as innocent as the day is long ..."

"Lord Gorliz, my name — and my authority as a representative of the Emperor — has been compromised by this woman's actions. This woman has a long-standing reputation for contempt for all authority. She even boasts of it. Such actions cannot be allowed to go unchallenged! Indeed, there can be only one penalty for such treason!"

Nath chuckled and responded haughtily, "It is not the Emperor I am contemptuous of Adar. It is you."

"You see, My Lord Gorliz! Even now, even here, she defies my authority! I demand satisfaction ... I demand action be taken!"

Adar might have said more, but his wide girth and the heat of the midday sun required him to stop for air. In that brief interlude, Gorliz and Paramexor conferred in hushed tones. No more than a single sentence passed between them. Then, both smiled a knowing smile of agreement.

"Prefect Adar, we have heard your words and we concur. Satisfaction shall be served. In accordance with guild law, a decision has been reached."

"Excellent your graciousness!"

"And you shall be the one to act ..."

"Thank you, your ... excuse me, Lord Gorliz, but did I hear you to say ..."

"You did indeed, Adar. Observe the two individuals approaching at this moment. They each carry a short sword — one for you and one for your rival."

"My Lord, I do not understand ..."

"But, of course you do, Prefect. As the injured party, you have the right to claim satisfaction — as you yourself demanded. In accordance with Paramexor guild law and established precedent, you will now have the opportunity to mete out your own brand of satisfaction. Of course, should you fail in your attempt, we will be forced to conclude that your charges were false. The willful prosecution of false charges is, as you well know Prefect, a crime, one which in this instance, I am bound to acknowledge, the injured party has a right to seek out a redress of grievances by claiming her own brand of satisfaction."

"I withdraw the charges! I withdraw the charges!"

"Judgment having been reached, this court stands adjourned. Do try to give a good showing of yourself, Prefect. I have wagered the Guild Master that you can survive, win or lose, for at least 10 minutes. In the future, you will come to appreciate that I do not like having my time wasted on matters involving false accusations against Imperial citizens. In the meantime, if you want justice, it is yours to take. Enjoy ..."

— Extract from court proceedings,
Reson Nath v. Imperial Prefect Adar,
Guild Master Janq Paramexor Presiding.

"Each person, in his or her own way, must assess their own value in life. Until they cross the law, that is! Then, the Empire slaps a bounty on them and I decide whether or not they're worth my time chasing halfway across the galaxy after ..."

— Zardra

Changing The Odds

"Are we there yet?"

Dannen looked at Purr. It was the fortieth time she'd asked him during this two-week trip through hyperspace, and it had been driving him nuts. This time, however, he had an answer for her.

"We should be coming up on Rafft soon," he said.

"Then we meet this... Rebellion?"

"Sort of. We're going to meet a group of Rebels who work out of this system."

Purr looked at the star lines. "What did you say they did?"

Dannen rolled his eyes. "I said they were guerrillas. They specialize in hit-and-run tactics - - they run in, blow something up, then leave."

Purr's eyes widened. "We're carrying bombs?"

"No, we're carrying medical supplies. Seems that their bacta tank malfunctioned and exploded, so we have a new one with some fresh bacta."

"The healing jelly?"

"Yeah. That and some other stuff. It's only medical supplies, Purr. We won't get blown up." At least, I hope not, he thought.

At that moment, the hyperdrive disengaged. The stars resumed their normal appearance outside the canopy, looking like diamonds surrounding the green sphere that hung in their midst.

Dannen checked his readouts, then nodded towards the planet. "That's it, Purr. That's Rafft."

As the Lifeline approached the globe, Purr glanced at Dannen curiously. "What is the Rebellion?"

Dannen grimaced. "It's not something you can describe in a few words. You know what Imperial stormtroopers are?"

"The men in white armor?"

"Yes. Well, they are the law enforcement arm of the galactic government, which is controlled by a man called the Emperor. Well, there are some who believe that the Emperor is evil, and are trying to destroy him."

Purr thought about this. "Is he?"

Dannen looked at her. "Is he what?"

"Evil."

Dannen considered lying, but then chose the truth. "Yes, he is. He wants to control everything and everybody."

"Why don't you want to work for them?"

"What, the Rebellion? Well, it's a losing fight. The Empire is much too powerful for them. And, of course, if they find out that you work for the Rebels, they kill you." Dannen smiled ruefully. "Linkaas is one being who wants me dead. I don't need a whole government after me - - er, us."

Purr smiled at her inclusion. "So Krell arranged this for us? He must be a very good friend."

"Yeah, The best." Dannen gazed down on the planet, lost in thought...

* * *

"And that's the story, Krell."

Krell had stared openmouthed at Dannen, then at Purr, then back again. "I can believe it. Linkaas never was one for subtlety. So, what are you two doing here on Alderaan?"

"What I've always been doing. Looking for cargo to run. Moving cargo and staying out of his way."

"What about the Rebellion?"

"Rebellion?" Purr said.

"Long story - - I'll explain later," Dannen said. "I'm not interested in politics, Krell."

Krell rose to retrieve a fresh bottle from the refrigeration unit in his home's living area. "You have not heard? I have heard murmurings that the Empire is developing a special project," he said, leaning forward, his words becoming hushed. "And any special project the Empire develops certainly endangers the freedom of peace-loving worlds."

Dannen smirked. "Have you been taking Linkaas' spice? How do you know what the Empire's up to?"

"I have certain reliable friends who would have access to such information..."

"Look, Krell," Dannen said, "I just need a tip on where I can go to make some credits. I've known you for a long time - - you know everything. Give me an idea."

Krell thought, then looked at his longtime buddy. "Are you willing to work for the Rebellion?"

"What, full-time? Nope. You know I feel for them, but I don't usually get involved in politics." He deliberated for a moment. "Tell you what - - I'll move some cargo for them, but I'm not getting involved."

"All right, I will set up a meet. When I have something for you, I will leave a message. Are you at the spaceport?"

"Yeah, we can't exactly afford a posh suite," Dannen grinned.

"Of course, of course. Give it a couple of days; I will leave a message with the codeword at the port when I have something."

Dannen rose. "Good. Alderaan's a nice place to visit, but it's too close to the edge for me, you know?"

Krell smiled as he showed them to the door. "Yes, I do know."

* * *

And now they'd arrived. Rafft was a heavily forested planet, with several settlements dotting the planetscape. Checking the coordinates provided by Krell, Dannen angled the ship toward one of the smaller townships. He landed at the insignificant port, in a landing pit dug into the ground. A tiny tower stood over the other depressions, as if standing guard.

With a hiss, the ramp lowered and Dannen stepped out. "Stay with the ship, Purr," he called up into the ship. "I'll be back in a little while."

"No, I want to come with you," Purr said.

Dannen looked down into her blue eyes, then relented. "Okay, you can come. Just stay with me."

She wrapped her arms around him, and kissed his cheek. "I will, I promise!" Embarrassed, Dannen disengaged from the embrace, then led her to the landing pit's exit ramp.

They walked into the town, glancing at the small shops and houses as they walked by. Dannen paused, gazing into the window of a vehicle repair bay, then entered, motioning for Purr to follow.

The mechanic looked up, then crawled out from under the landspeeder he was working on. He was a little shorter than Dannen, but he was maybe 20 years older. Stuffing a dirty cloth into his coveralls, he approached the pair.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"Yes, you can. I was told to look for a mechanic named Ashe - - he's supposed to be the best on Rafft."

The man smiled. "I'm Ashe, young sir," he replied. "What can I do for you?"

Dannen smiled back. "I was told you can fix a frozen quarkmeter with a large hydrosponder with one hand tied behind your back."

Purr looked at the man, then at Dannen. "Really?" She looked at Ashe, respect shining in her eyes.

Ashe looked at her for a moment, then his smile disappeared. "Who are you?"

"Name's Dannen Lifehold." Dannen leaned closer. "Krell sent me."

"You have the supplies, then?"

"Yes, I do. Where would you like them?"

Ashe reached under the counter and pulled out a datapad. He typed for a minute, then removed the small mem-stik. "This has the planetary coordinates for the base," he said, extending it to Dannen. "Take the supplies there - - you'll get paid on delivery."

Dannen noted the sour tone the last words carried as he took the mem-stik. The man clearly thought he was a mercenary smuggler, only in it for the money.

Dannen wondered if Ashe might be right.

Purr caught the tone in Ashe's voice, and the look that he had given Dannen, but she made no mention of it as they walked back to the Lifeline. Dannen's silence spoke volumes to her, however - - she had been taught since birth to watch the body language of other beings, and to determine what they might do. Dannen was upset, she knew, but if she spoke, he'd just get angry. And that was the last thing she wanted. No, better to let him work it out for himself, she decided.

Inside, however, she smiled. Of course, if he needs my help, I'll be here.

* * *

The memory stick he'd been given directed him to a clearing about 200 kilometers outside the township. The clearing was large enough for the Lifeline to land, and still have enough room for the supplies. Telling Purr to stay put, Dannen disembarked, slowly stepping onto the soil. His blaster was in his hand as he gazed into the trees and bushes surrounding the clearing.

Suddenly, he sensed someone behind him. He whirled quickly, just in time to find the barrel of a blaster pointed at his face. The other person wore a uniform camouflaged for the forest, complete with breath mask, and suspicious eyes.

"Who're you?" the stranger asked in a voice distorted by the mask.

Dannen slowly raised his hands. "Name's Dannen Lifehold," he answered. "Ashe sent me."

"Do you have the mem-stik?"

Dannen slowly reached into his breast pocket and withdrew it. The stranger took the stick, examined it, then holstered the blaster.

"Who else is on board?"

"Just my mechanic."

"Do you have the supplies?"

"They're in the hold," Dannen said, lowering his hands.

The stranger produced a comlink from a pocket. "Leaf One to Base: all clear, bring the movers."

"Copy, Leaf One," a voice answered.

Leaf One reached up and removed the breath mask, releasing a mass of auburn hair and smiling blue eyes. She extended a hand to Dannen. "I'm Tawn Porew," she said. "Sorry about the ambush, but you're not our regular supplier."

Dannen shook hands with her as he led her to the ship. "Well, I got the job at the last minute. Wait a second." He raised his voice. "Purr, open the cargo hatch!" The docking ring promptly extended itself from the top of the ship.

Dannen sighed. "No, Purr, the button next to it!" With the customary hiss of hydraulics, the cargo hatch began lowering.

Tawn chuckled. "Your mechanic doesn't know your ship too well, does he?"

"She hasn't been with me too long. It's kind of a long story." He glanced back into the woods. "I hope you brought enough cargo lifters - - there's quite a bit of stuff."

"Don't worry, they'll be here." She sized him up. "You'll get your money when we've verified the inventory. You'll have to stay until we do."

"No problem," Dannen said. "Actually, I'd like to stay." He looked into the forest again. "When you've lived in space as long as I have, you appreciate planetfall... "

* * *

After the Rebels unloaded the Lifeline, Tawn and her commander took them to the base as the others moved the crates. It was fairly small, but cleverly hidden in a cave complex. There was just enough room for a small medical facility, bunks for 12, and an ammo dump.

"You have no ships?"

Tawn looked at Purr, then shook her head. "We just harass the Imperials on the planet we're assigned to, and try to set up Rebel cells."

Dannen blinked. "What would the Imperials want from here? From what I've seen, this isn't exactly the technological high point of the galaxy."

"The Empire is clearing land and building a garrison base," Tawn said. "We've been sabotaging equipment most of the time, and trying to find out why the Empire wants a base on Rafft."

"Wait a minute. With no ships, what happens if you have to evacuate?"

"We can't," Base Commander Peck told him. "The Rebellion doesn't have enough ships to outfit every outpost, so we are forced to go without."

"That's a little cold-blooded, isn't it?"

"That's how we operate. We knew it would be dangerous, but we believe in what we're fighting for." He looked at Dannen with disdain. "We don't do it for money."

"Now wait a minute... " Dannen bristled.

Peck turned away from him. "Sergeant Porew, unpack the supplies, verify them, then pay this - - person - - and get him out of here."

"We'd like to take a look around, six," Dannen said.

The commander looked at him coldly. "If it's all right," Dannen added hastily.

"Very well. Sergeant, show them around, but keep your eyes on them." With that, he strode off.

"Yes, sir," Tawn answered. She faced Dannen. "He's not big on mercenaries," she said.

"Why not?" Purr asked.

"Mercenaries killed the woman he loved."

Purr's eyes watered. "Oh, no."

Tawn put a hand on Purr's shoulder. "It was a while ago. Come on, I'll show you where you can get something to eat."

Dannen shook his head. "I'll help with the unpacking, if I can."

"Me, too," Purr piped up.

Tawn smiled. It was a lovely sight. "We can use the help. This way." She led them to a small area where the crates had been placed. Three Rebels were

already unpacking the supplies. They looked up as Tawn showed Dannen inside.

"This is the man who brought the supplies," she said. "And this is his partner. They want to help unpack."

The taller of the trio smiled. "Good, we can use it. Help me uncrate this bacta tank."

Dannen gave an answering smile. "You got it," he said, moving toward the crate. The man, who said his name was Colin, gave Purr a laser cutter, and showed her how to slice the packing material and not the precious cargo it protected. Once the crate was opened, Dannen, Tawn, and Colin muscled it out. Within half an hour the tank was upright and in its new location.

As they worked, Purr turned to Tawn. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Why did you join the Rebellion? Why do you fight this Emperor?"

Tawn stopped working to answer Purr. "My parents were killed by the Empire," she said. Her eyes misted for a moment. "They refused to give up their land. So they were killed."

Purr gaped. "And the Emperor said to have them killed?"

"No. The Emperor is the head of the government. He's power-hungry. He wants to control the entire galaxy. He uses fear and terror to keep some planets in line. Others he simply sends in stormtroopers and destroys."

"But why?"

"Well, some planets have resources that the Empire needs, some have strategic value, and some he controls just to keep other planets in line." Tawn grimaced. "One planet, kept under control, will keep other planets - - sometimes whole systems - - from fighting back. And, since the Jedi are gone, the Rebellion's the best chance the galaxy has."

Purr's brow furrowed. "The Jedi?"

Colin spoke up, his voice full of reverence. "The Jedi Knights were the keepers of the flame of the Old Republic. They knew how to use the Force to fight for justice and truth."

"Yeah, but the Force didn't keep them safe from Vader," Dannen said.

"He betrayed them," Colin answered. "He took their trust and stomped on it."

"That's ancient history, Colin. Believe me, I wish the Jedi were still around, Force or no Force. They would give the Empire a run for its credits." Dannen handed the hydrospanner he was using to Colin, then sighed. "As it stands, though, I think you're fighting a losing battle. The Rebellion doesn't stand much of a chance."

"Is that what you think?" Tawn asked.

"Hey, don't get me wrong. I believe in what you're fighting for. I just want to stay alive."

"By being a smuggler? You have some strange ideas about staying alive, my friend," said Colin.

Colin helped Dannen move the bacta containers to the tank. The Rebel connected a wide hose from the container to the tank's inlet valve, and pressed the white "fill" button on the tank. There was a loud hiss as the valve inside the hose punched its way through the seals, then the gelled fluid began to seep into the holding tank.

Dannen turned to Tawn. "By the way, are you guys really expendable? I thought the Rebellion needed all the people it could get."

"Commander Peck feels we are. He believes in the Rebellion, as we all do, but he's from the old school."

Dannen grinned. "You mean the 'Come on, do you wanna live forever' type?"

"He's a good man," Colin said from behind the tank. "And he leads his people well. We've survived some tough situations without backup or evacuation plans, mostly due to his leadership."

"I'll take your word for it, Colin. But you'll understand if I don't like him too much."

Colin came around from the tank to stand next to Dannen. "That's quite all right - - sometimes I don't like him much either." He faced the tank. "You have no idea how badly we needed this bacta."

"I can guess. You folks have seen a lot of action, huh?"

Tawn answered. "Yes. We disabled a small Imperial shuttle last month." A grin lit her face as she remembered. "Delayed their take-off long enough for us to booby-trap their power cells. They blew up in hyperspace."

"But two men who were preparing the booby-trapped cells died when they exploded prematurely," said a new voice. They all turned to face Commander Peck, who had walked in. "If we'd had this-" he tapped the side of the tank "- - they would have survived."

Purr's eyes widened. "I'm sorry."

"Why should you be sorry? You're just a delivery service - - why should you two care?"

"Look, despite what you may think, we do care," Dannen snarled. "It's just that..."

Purr, who had been watching the bacta flow into the tank, suddenly tapped Dannen's shoulder. "What's that?" Purr asked, pointing into the bacta.

Colin squinted. "Looks like a piece of equipment." Quickly, he shut off the power, then climbed into the tank. He reached into the jelly and pulled out a fist-sized cube of metal. He hoisted himself out, wiping the gel from the cube.

"What is it?" Dannen asked.

"Don't know. Let's ask our tech expert." Colin tapped his comlink. "Baker to Thinker, do you read?"

"Thinker here, go ahead."

"We've found something in the bacta shipment - - want to take a look?"

"On my way," came the reply.

A minute later a short man with brown hair and a sour expression came in. He squinted up at Dannen and Purr for a moment. "You the smugglers?"

Dannen sighed, rolling his eyes. "Yes."

The shorter man smiled. "Thank you for the supplies. We owe you a debt worth far more than what you're being paid."

Dannen, taken aback by this unexpected kindness, simply nodded.

The short man turned to Colin. "Is that it?" he asked, indicating the cube.

Colin surrendered it to his comrade.

Thinker turned the object over in his hands for a few minutes, then looked at his commanding officer. "It's a homing beacon, sir."

"What?" Dannen said, incredulous.

Peck's eyes widened as he looked at Thinker. "You mean that this... man.. . has not only brought in medical supplies, he's brought in a blasted homing beacon?"

Colin looked dazed. "A homing beacon?"

Peck drew his blaster and whirled to face Dannen. "You scum. And I thought you were helping us. I thought that maybe I had been wrong, and that you have honor after all. How much are they paying you, bounty hunter?"

Dannen paled. "You think I did it?"

Peck glared at Dannen. "You knew we couldn't evacuate. You set us up, didn't you? Thanks to you, the Empire will be here soon!"

"No, I didn't! I swear I didn't know!"

Colin spoke up. "He didn't know, sir. He couldn't have known."

Peck spun to face Colin. "Why not?"

"Because the bacta case still had the original factory triple seals. He couldn't have inserted the homing beacon and kept the seals intact. He's just as much a victim as we are."

Peck considered this, lowering his blaster, then turned to Thinker. "What's the range of this beacon?"

"Short-range, probably in-system," Thinker replied. "We have an hour, maybe two."

Krell must've known, Dannen thought to himself. But why? Why would he set me up?

Another Rebel came running in. "Sir," he said, saluting Peck. "Report from the settlement: the Imperials are here on Rafft. Ashe reports a small squad of scout troopers in the settlement. Communications have already been severed."

"We'll never scatter in time!" Tawn said.

"Well, we can destroy the base, but we're expendable, Sergeant."

Purr touched Dannen's shoulder. He met her gaze, read the question in her eyes. He nodded to her, then looked back at Peck. "No, you're not," he said.

Peck's face reddened. "Now listen here, smuggler..."

"No, you listen, Commander," Dannen exploded. "You may think you're expendable, but there's always a chance to escape. I think I have a way to get you all out of here... provided, of course, that..."

"... That you get paid, of course," Peck interrupted him.

"No," Dannen countered, "provided that you have someplace in mind to go. Is there somewhere?"

"We don't have a ship, though," Colin said.

"No, but I do," Dannen answered. "It'll be a tight fit, and it'll be necessary supplies only, but I can manage if you all move fast, taking only what you need. Within an hour we all can be gone." He turned to Peck. "What do you say, Commander?"

Peck examined Dannen for a moment. "Let's get moving," he ordered.

Dannen turned to his partner. "Purr, get things started; we're leaving in an hour."

Peck caught his arm. "Why are you doing this? You're not getting paid to risk your life for us."

"That's true, Commander, I'm not."

"Then, why?" Thinker asked.

Dannen turned to the smaller man. "Because you have no choice," he said quietly. "And because it's the right thing to do."

* * *

Dannen had been correct. It was a tight fit, trying to squeeze 12 people and their equipment into the Lifeline. The cargo hold was stuffed to capacity, and both Dannen and Purr had to share their quarters with two other people each. But they were ready to lift off within an hour, just as Dannen had promised.

Tawn was worried, though. "Can you take off with all these people on board?"

"Sure we can," Dannen reassured her. "This is a YT-1300. The cargo capacity is about a hundred metric tons. If she can handle that, she can handle this."

Peck came up to them. "We are all ready. The coordinates for our new location are on this mem-stik," he said, handing it to Dannen.

"You still don't trust me, do you, Commander?"

"That has nothing to do with it," Peck sniffed. "I simply don't want any mistakes."

"Don't worry, Commander, I'll get you there. You have my word."

Peck snorted. "We'll see," was all he'd say.

Dannen sat down in the pilot's chair and looked over at Purr. "Okay, here we go," he said, powering up the ship. Slowly, the Lifeline lifted off and made for the open sky.

Shortly after they cleared atmosphere, Dannen slid the mem-stik into the nav computer. He turned to Peck, who was seated right behind him. "Okay, the computer's reading your coordinates, Commander. As soon as I'm lined up on the correct vector, we're on our way."

Suddenly, cannon fire rocked the ship. The Lifeline tilted dangerously to the left, throwing Purr out of her seat.

Dannen slapped the shield activator and checked the sensors. "We have company," he said.

"So it seems," Peck said. "You did set us up, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't," Dannen retorted, "and if you want proof, you'll find they'll kill me just as readily as they'll kill you." Another blast shook the ship, but this time the shields held.

Dannen glanced at Peck. "See what I mean?"

He checked the computer readout, then grabbed the hyperdrive activator levers. "Here we go!" he shouted, then pulled back on the levers sharply. The ship stuttered... then stalled.

"Damn," Dannen said.

"What's wrong?" Tawn asked.

Dannen flipped switches, then peered at a screen. "That first blast must have damaged the hyper-drive."

"I'll fix it," Purr said, running out the door toward the engineering hatch.

Tawn tapped his shoulder. "Can she fix it?"

Dannen paused, then nodded. "If she can't, no one can," he added. "In the meantime, let's give these guys a run for their credits." With that, he barrel rolled to the right, while checking the sensors.

Suddenly, a large shadow passed over the canopy. Tawn looked for the cause and gasped. "An Imperial Star Destroyer," she whispered.

"Yep," Dannen confirmed. "Looks like they want you guys really bad."

Tawn turned to Peck. "It's the Engager, Commander." She chuckled. "I guess Dalton's still unhappy about his face."

"What about his face?" Dannen asked.

"Captain Dalton was caught in one of our traps awhile back," Peck answered. "It cut his face up rather badly."

Dannen winced. "Ouch. No wonder he's upset."

"Rumor is he won't get the scar fixed until we're captured and executed. He uses his disfigurement to inspire those under his command."

"Actually, sir, I think it's an improvement," Tawn grinned.

"Perhaps, Sergeant. Can you outrun them, Lifehold?"

"Maybe, maybe not, Commander. But there's one thing this ship can do that theirs can't, and that's maneuver. Hold tight, everyone," he said, whipping the ship into a sharp bank.

"You see, Commander," Dannen continued as the commander picked himself off the floor, "it doesn't matter if I can outrun her, it's a matter of whether I can evade their tractor beams. To do that, I have to out-fly her long enough for Purr to fix the hyperdrive."

"Which reminds me... " He reached over and flicked a switch. "Purr, how bad is the damage?"

"Not too bad," came the reply. "I can fix it, but I need parts."

"Do what you have to do, Purr, just do it fast!"

"Don't worry, Dannen, I'll do it fast."

Dannen shut off the comlink. "Now, we wait," he said.

A turbolaser blast exploded just in front of him, and he banked straight up. "And fly," he added.

"I hope this mechanic of yours is good enough, Lifehold," Peck grumbled.

"Relax, Commander, she knows what... " At that moment, the main cabin lights went out. A split second later, the emergency lights came on, bathing the room in a red glow. "... she's doing," he finished.

"Are you sure?" Peck said sardonically.

Dannen pressed the comlink. "Purr, the ship lights just went out!"

"I know, I needed parts."

"From the lighting system?" Tawn asked incredulously.

"We're dead," Peck commented.

"With all due respect, Commander," Dannen growled, rolling the ship as he did, "shut up."

For the next few minutes, Dannen tried every trick he knew and some new ones to keep the Lifeline away from the Star Destroyer. He was right about one

thing: the smaller transport was far more agile than the ponderous cruiser. But it still took all he had to keep their distance.

Tawn checked the sensors and noticed with horror that the Star Destroyer had moved closer. "Dannen, we're running out of time!"

"Yeah, I noticed," he grunted. He slapped the comlink button. "Purr, how much longer?"

"Almost done, Dannen... almost done... done!" As she spoke, Dannen yanked back on the control levers, and the Lifeline shot into hyperspace.

Dannen sank back into his chair with a sigh. "See? I told you she could fix it." He glanced around the cabin. "We'll just have to go without lights for a while."

"But how did she do it so fast?" Tawn asked.

"I don't know - - I've given up trying to figure out how she does it." He turned and smiled out the canopy. "I'm just glad she does it."

* * *

The Lifeline arrived at the Vondarc system four days later. The group rendezvoused with a Rebel cargo frigate making its regular stop to pick up supplies from Alliance sympathizers in the area.

The Rebels from Rafft quickly transferred their gear and effects to the frigate, which was returning to the Rebel sector command base.

On board the frigate, Tawn and Commander Peck escorted Dannen and Purr to their quarters. The Commander, in gratitude, had ordered the repair of the Lifeline's hyperdrive, and Dannen didn't hesitate to accept.

The repairs would take all day, however, and rather than stay on their ship, Dannen and Purr joined the Rebels at mealtime and helped them transfer their gear to the cargo frigate.

Halfway through the day, Purr watched as Dannen paced the length of the rec room. "I still can't believe Krell did this!" "Set you up?"

"Yes, set us up! He was my oldest friend. We'd been through so much together. I can't believe he'd do it."

"Maybe he didn't."

Dannen paused. "You mean, someone else put the tracking beacon in there?"

Purr grimaced. "I have seen such badness with crime lords. They called it... umm... treachery?"

"So you think we were both set up - - me and Krell?"

"Maybe. Krell did seem like he was glad to see you."

"Yes, he did, didn't he?" Dannen muttered. "But still-"

His musings were cut short by the arrival of Tawn and Peck. Peck, for once, was smiling. "You'll be pleased to know, Captain, that the repairs to your ship have been completed, and you may leave at any time."

"Thank you, Commander. Again, I'd like to thank you for getting it fixed. "

Tawn smiled "It's the least we could do. You risked your lives for us, after all." She came over and stood next to him. "Are you sure you can't come with us? You and Purr would make excellent additions to the Rebellion."

Dannen shook his head. "I told you, I'm not ready to commit myself just yet. Besides, I have to get back to Alderaan and talk to Krell." He gazed out the window at the Lifeline. "We've got to be going."

"Well, we'll be sorry to see you go-" The commander was interrupted by Colin, who came up and saluted hastily.

Peck returned the salute. "What is it, soldier?"

"Sir, we've just received a report from sector 246."

"And?" Peck prompted when Colin hesitated.

"Sir, they report that... well... Alderaan has been destroyed, sir."

"What?" Dannen burst out.

Purr put her arm around Dannen's shoulder, and he gathered her into a tight embrace. "All those people... all those lives..." she murmured.

Peck's jaw almost stretched to the floor. "Destroyed? The whole planet?"

"Yes sir, the whole planet. Alderaan's gone, Commander."

"Krell said he'd heard something about a secret project the Empire was working on," Dannen's heart tightened.

"Rebel high command had one or two top operatives on Alderaan," Peck noted. "It's possible Krell was one of them."

"I'd bet the Empire has something to do with Alderaan," Dannen said.

Peck nodded soberly. "I'm sorry about your friend, Lifehold."

"Thank you, Commander," Dannen said. He glanced down at Purr, who nodded up at him, then faced Peck again. "The Empire has just changed the rules on you guys. I'd like to help even the odds if I can."

Colin gaped. "But I thought-"

Dannen cut him off. "You thought wrong, Colin. So, what do you say, Commander?"

Peck looked at him. "We can't afford to pay you what you're accustomed to."

Dannen approached Peck until their noses almost touched. "Is that what you think this is all about?" he asked, a dangerous glint in his eye. "Really? "

Tawn tried to take his arm, but Dannen wrenched it free. Peck looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I meant that-"

Dannen didn't let it pass. "Do you really think that I do things only for money? That I'm just a mercenary - - a man without principles who only believes in the almighty credit?"

Peck held his gaze. "To be honest, yes, that's what I think."

"Okay, then, I'm going to prove you wrong. Right here, and right now." Dannen drew himself to his full height. "I want to join the Rebellion as a transport pilot."

Tawn gasped slightly. "You don't mean that."

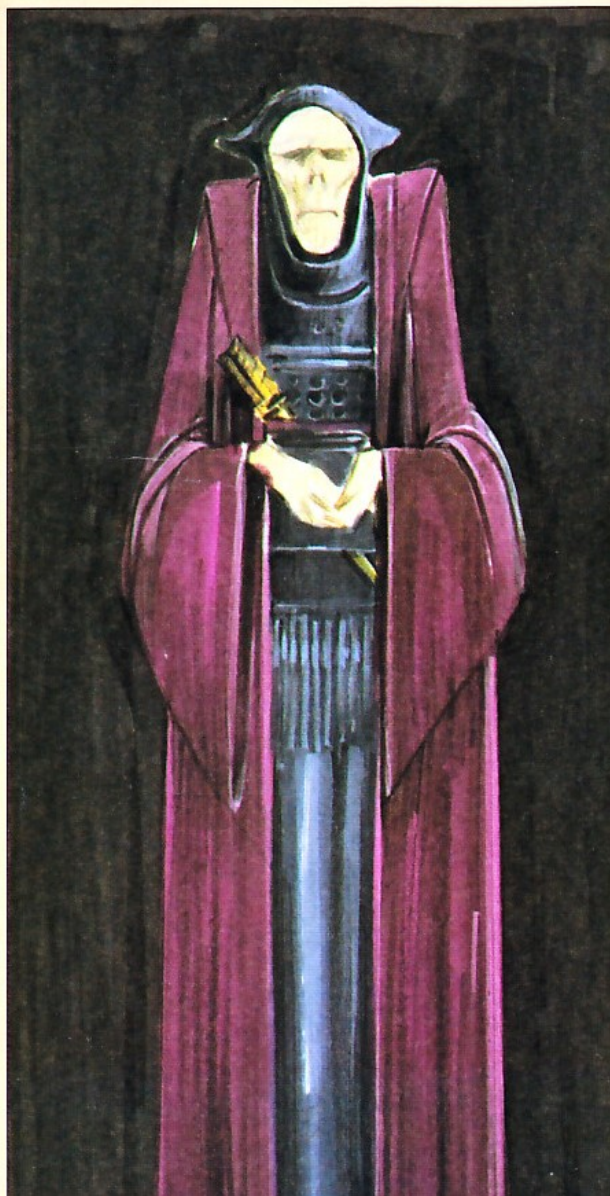
"Yes, I do, Tawn. Purr and I have talked about this before. We're both sure."

Peck regarded the younger man. "May I ask why? Because of your friend?"

"No," Dannen replied. "Because of Alderaan. Because of the innocent people. Because if the Empire could do this to one planet, they'll do it to another." He smiled slightly. "But mostly because it's the right thing to do."

Peck nodded, and smiled also. "Very well. Welcome to the Rebel Alliance, Captain Lifehold."

Illustrated Guide To The Star Wars Universe: Coruscant



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Pollux Hax served for several years as chief of the Emperor's propaganda dissemination section.

We are honored to present this report exactly as Emperor Palpatine wishes it published.

Being an enlightened man, the Emperor has read many articles on the cultures, life-forms, and land forms of other planets, the better to understand them so that his benevolent rule could be more attentive to the needs of his subjects. He commissioned **Pollux Hax** to write a similar article about the wonders of Imperial Center, which was called Coruscant in the days of the Old Republic.

We are pleased to present this report verbatim. Not one word has been changed from the original text.

The illustrious planet Coruscant, now renamed Imperial Center to reflect the progress of the times, has been the hub of the galaxy's government for millennia. Naturally, since Emperor Palpatine wishes to minimize displacement of his subjects, the planet continues to serve in this capacity, as it did during the days of the Old Republic and perhaps even before. The recorded history of Coruscant stretches back so far that it becomes indistinguishable from legend, and we in the Imperial administration are proud to be part of this continuing legacy.

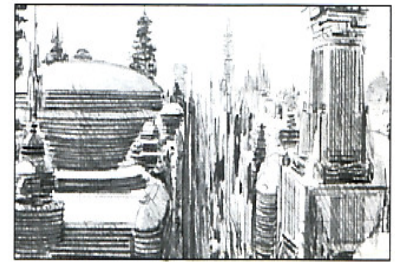
Galactic governments have changed over the ages, but Coruscant has always been the center of power. Though poor in resources, the planet thrives on the changing tides of politics, providing a stable anchor through damaging rebellions, the long-overdue fall of the corrupt Old Republic, and the sweeping introduction of the Emperor's resplendent New Order.

After many thousands of years of constant construction and expansion, Coruscant's entire planetary surface has been covered with layer upon layer of buildings, like crystalline growths on a rock. Portions of the unending city have been rebuilt, demolished, and rebuilt again over the centuries. As part of the Emperor's new efficiency programs, not a square meter of space is wasted, and the people are happier than before.

The rooftop of virtually any building offers a truly breathtaking view unparalleled on any other world. Towering skyscrapers, built of transparisteel and smoked duracrete, stretch to the horizon like a great forest of structures built by hundreds of different architects, both human and alien. The city dazzles the imagination, and has rightfully been the subject of much poetry and music commissioned by the Emperor himself.

Many of the huge buildings are identical—non-descript and functional, population centers where people live, work, and sleep. Other gigantic constructions are wildly exotic, designed by alien minds accustomed to worlds with less gravity or other resources. At the tops of the skyscrapers lighted shuttle landing pads welcome visitors. Everything gleams, everything is clean. Never before in all of history has a city such as this existed.

Our planet is a interminable metropolis that twinkles with power systems, city lights, traffic landing beacons. Seen from



orbit, Imperial Center is a blaze of light and sparkling colors, reminding some spacers of gemlike corusca stones, after which this planet was named long ago.

Because of its importance in galactic politics, off-worlders view an assignment to Imperial City as a marvelous opportunity to promote bureaucratic careers back on their home worlds. It is a challenging but rapid career path, with the rewards of a satisfying career in civil service.

The greatest minds are tempered by the stress, turned into valuable gems in the Imperial administration.

Other workers, unfortunately, succumb to "government fever," which catches them up



in the hypnotic bustle of galactic politics. Obsessed, they work practically round the clock, as if their own small involvement in running the Empire were some kind of drug. They become wrapped up in their jobs to the exclusion of all else, obsessed with politics. Those who suffer from government fever rarely leave Imperial Center, requesting extension after extension on their "temporary" assignments. Most of these staffers die young, squeezed dry by

the demands of their profession . . . much to the Emperor's dismay, of course.

The buildings of Imperial Center are densely packed, with major thoroughfares slicing like deep canyons through the metropolis. Hawk-bats ride thermals flowing up from the bowels of the city, swooping down to prey upon granite slugs and other creatures that have adapted to survive on the vertical surfaces of the tall buildings. It is a magnificent sight to see these efficient and successful predators attacking these destructive parasites on our city.

The complex terrain of towering metal and trans-steel pinnacles makes our weather difficult to predict, even with the best Imperial climate modeling routines. Occasionally, unexpected storms coalesce out of water evaporating from millions of rooftop exhaust vents, condensing and rising from the skyscraper forests, creating squalls that dump rain upon the hard surfaces of the buildings.

Each section of our vast, unending city has highlights and attractions for visiting dignitaries and off-planet sightseers. The marvels of Imperial City are sung from planet to planet. Automated tourist stations provide information on cultural activities that cater to different interests. The numerous entertainment centers are clusters of bright lights and exotic pleasures ranging from the hedonistic to the enlightening and educational. No one has ever been disappointed with the spectrum of enjoyment available on Imperial Center.

For example, the Skydome Botanical Gardens rest on the level roof of an isolated skyscraper. Constructed by an Old Republic philanthropist who had grown rich by establishing the Galactic News Service (one of the more prominent news services that help disseminate all the information appropriate for the Emperor's subjects), this giant terrarium is a carefully tended place with compartmentalized environments to display exotic and otherwise extinct flora from those worlds that have sworn fealty to the Empire.

Tour droids, fluent in most known forms of communication, are available for hire, although special guide/guards are required for entry into our

renowned Carnivorous Plants section. Because the Skydome Botanical Gardens are such a popular attraction, and because they are so near the Imperial Palace, the facility is often used for receptions thrown to honor important arriving diplomats.

Learned scholars from all corners of the galaxy come to study at the spacious Galactic Museum, which houses records dating back thousands of years, through the stages of the Old Republic, preserving artifacts from lost civilizations. Popular displays include relics from the Sith culture and tokens of the old order of Jedi Knights. Though the Emperor has been forced to eliminate funding for the museum, due to costs incurred in snuffing out the damaging rebellion against his rule, he has given his verbal support for the museum to continue to preserve the heritage of his subjects.

Another of Coruscant's popular attractions—built during the days of the Old Republic so that now it appears rather dated and rough at the edges—is the Holographic Zoo for Extinct Animals. Inside a labyrinth of small chambers, dramatic three-dimensional dioramas are projected, showing spectacular (perhaps even fanciful) life-forms from other planets, such as the mammoth krabbex, the manticore, and the singing fig trees of Pil-Diller.

A recreational area frequented by the civil servants and other planet-bound inhabitants of Imperial Center is Monument Park—a protected mall built around what was once a tall peak in the Menarai Mountains visible from the Imperial Palace. Since practically every square meter of land on the planet has been built over, Monument Park gives the people a chance to touch the naked ground.

Layers and layers of construction have erased most topographical features from view, but the single jagged outcropping of this one mountain peak still protrudes from the surrounding buildings, to the amazement and delight of all. Emperor Palpatine himself often goes to this place for his own solitude and communion with nature.

A small group of meditative religious followers has made a shrine of the rock outcropping, however, protecting it from souvenir gatherers who might chip off a flake of stone as a memento to take

back to their crowded cities. The meditative followers stand vigil around the mountaintop, touching the living rock and communing with the sleeping core of Coruscant. From the bare stone they attempt to draw a reminder of the peace and serenity the world experienced before the sprawling cities. The Emperor, naturally, tolerates all such forms of religious expression.

Some libelous and illegal reports have claimed that the Emperor has a clear prejudice against nonhuman species, but this is demonstrably not true. Sentient beings from the Empire's arctic worlds make their homes in the planet's colder latitudes, while aliens from hotter tropical worlds live closer to the equator. Species accustomed to subterranean settings inhabit the lower, shadowy levels of the Imperial Center's huge buildings.

To understand the depth of the Emperor's tolerance, one needs only to observe the cultural areas he has allowed to exist in segregated parts of the city. In carefully bordered sectors designated for particular cultures and life-forms, these honored nonhuman visitors can live their lives as they would on their homeworlds. There they are protected from the hazards of genuine prejudice by guardian contingents of stormtroopers who patrol the borders of the alien sections.

Architecture varies to reflect the different cultures and their social preferences in colorful pockets of "ethnic neighborhoods" like charming islands in the midst of Imperial City.

Often these alien neighborhoods are dominated by tall statues erected to honor offworld heroes and planetary legends from other parts of the galaxy. Humans are frequently confused to see towering monuments of bizarre multilegged heroes riding equally bizarre mounts in these permanent reenactments of forgotten glory.

Unfortunately, due to the extended diplomatic families and retainers from alien planets who do not understand Imperial customs and rules, many personal squabbles erupt. The Emperor has brought in crack squadrons of stormtroopers to quash any such short-lived disturbances.

As part of his New Order, the Emperor has abolished the outdated Old Republic concept of diplomatic immunity. All troublemakers are responsible for the problems they cause, and disobedience is dealt with sternly. We are proud to note that there are very few repeat offenders. Thanks to the protective stormtrooper presence, Imperial City is one of the safest places in the galaxy.

Because the surface of Coruscant has been completely built over, resources and food are a precious commodity, and our people work together to make the whole system function efficiently. Transportation and delivery systems have been perfected,

out of necessity. Giant thoroughfares carry shipments continuously and at high speed, distributing needed items throughout the planetwide city. These shipments are generally shuttled through the lower levels of the metropolis, where they will not disturb the more important government officials.

New raw materials are brought down from asteroids on the fringes of the Coruscant system, as needed. Heavy lifters drop the massive rocks down through the atmosphere—but this is an extremely expensive way to get new supplies of metals for underground processing stations.

Instead, the people of Imperial City have developed closed-loop ecosystems inside their giant buildings. Major recycling efforts have resulted in an efficient operation monitored by multiarmed droids, sorting through the garbage of Imperial Center to select out even tiny scraps of useful material.

A metropolis as large and as old as Imperial City is in a constant state of urban renewal. Central planners in the Imperial Palace monitor the decay of old buildings and sections of the city. One entire central computer is devoted to updating and maintaining a master plan of the world-city. With our constant vigilance and preplanning, we have made Imperial Center the envy of all urban areas in the Empire.

On Coruscant, enormous walking factories—construction droids—wade through older sections of the city designated for renewal. These construction droids are fully as tall as the skyscrapers themselves, moving at a ponderous pace. Both the front and the back ends of these machines are a blur of moving mechanical arms, conveyor belts, demolition equipment, and sensors.

A construction droid tears down a condemned building in front, shoveling the debris into its vast furnaces and material sorters, where useful items are extracted, recycled, and smelted. The corresponding factory on the opposite half of the droid extrudes new girders and transparisteel sheets. The rear side of the droid assembles a brand-new building from a preprogrammed blueprint while the front side tears down the ruined hulk. As these independent construction droids march through old sections of the city, they leave in their wake a gleaming swath of polished new skyscrapers.

Only rarely has it happened that the directional sensors of these droids have malfunctioned, causing them to rip the wrong buildings apart, much to the dismay of the unfortunate inhabitants.

Dedicated Imperial functionaries are given the task of delivering the proper eviction notices to those still living within condemned structures; reports that these notices are often misdelivered, or not delivered at all, are grossly exaggerated. While it is true that occasionally people have had to flee as their building began to topple into wreckage around them, there are no casualties on record resulting from this inconvenience.

Surrounded by immense buildings, the deep lower levels of the city entrap air and create a sheltered microclimate. Moisture rises partway into the air up the sheer sides of the skyscrapers, condensing into small clouds, then drizzling a mist of lukewarm rain back down into the murk. Convective wind whistles through the narrow, building-lined canyons.

Deep in the lower, forgotten levels, in the oldest subbasements of ancient buildings, an entire shadowy culture has developed. Coruscant's underworld is dank and oppressive, never seeing the sun or the night sky because of the looming shadows of kilometer-high buildings. Low-flying shuttles traveling near ground level must fly with all their running lights on and weapons powered up. Otherwise, the underworld is never traveled alone.

Some have said that down here the Emperor keeps private detention centers where black IT-0 interrogation droids extract every scrap of valuable information from a victim. It is time to put these rumors to rest once and for all. The Emperor has no need of such barbaric practices, and he has no need to keep secrets.

Because all space traffic to and from Imperial Center is tightly controlled, many criminals flee to the lower levels to escape the Emperor's justice: bureaucrats who have made a fatal mistake in their paperwork, ambassadors from a planet reprimanded by the Emperor, even clumsy personal servants from the Imperial Palace...all vanish into the lower levels, where, amazingly, they think they must hide for the rest of their lives.

Judging from signs found by stormtrooper commando teams, these clever fugitives have established a tolerable lifestyle by revamping some of the abandoned underbasement rooms, tapping into electrical conduits, and stealing energy from the Imperial Center power grid. They have formed their own pathetic civilization from scraps of the shining world that has been forever forbidden to them.

We believe there may even be descendants of exiles from the Old Republic who do not know that the political order has changed for the better, that the Emperor's New Order has replaced the corruption and unpleasantness. Emperor Palpatine would welcome these refugees with open arms if only they would return and ask his pardon.

These poor people know no other life, not even in their imagination. Living like troglodytes, sleeping in abandoned alcoves, these shaggy semihumans have never seen the sun. Clothed in tatters, they walk

hunched from bone diseases and nutritional deficiencies; their skin is clammy and corpse-white. The Emperor's benevolence would extend even to such unproductive members of society, but the troglodyte specimens flee and somehow manage to elude all attempts to capture and reeducate them. Several troglodytes—unfortunately killed during capture—have been preserved and are now on display in the Galactic Museum.

The inhabitants of the underworld must live on scraps, or harvest the fungus that grows in the sodden shadows. Duracrete worms, shadow-barnacles, and granite slugs also inhabit the protected corners of the underworld.

Larger creatures, too, have made their homes in the forgotten tunnels, including gigantic mutated rodents that will attack and eat anything they can find—whether it fights back or not. The troglodytes must occasionally hunt these rat-things, then eat the flesh raw or sizzled on a burst-open power coupling. Before any of the automatic maintenance/repair droids can come to fix the ruptured power coupling, though, the troglodytes vanish into their hiding places.

Our failure to bring these poor people back into the fold of society remains the Empire's great shame.

The Imperial planet is too far from its small white sun to have a climate truly comfortable to humans, which leaves even the temperate zones of Coruscant rather cold and bleak.

However, because of our technological advances, the vast, self-contained metropolis is mostly immune to the climate outside. The attitude of most inhabitants is that Coruscant exists for the business of government, not for vacations and sunbathing and sightseeing...although many facilities have sprung up by necessity, simply because of the sheer numbers of people assigned to Imperial Center.

The most spectacular show in the night sky is the flaming veils of aurorae in shimmering gray-green and red curtains. The enormous amount of space traffic to and from Imperial Center continuously dumps residual field discharges and broken debris into orbit around the planet, energizing the aurorae even when Coruscant's sun is not in one of its active phases.

The densest population centers are clustered around the temperate zones, as are the main business areas, political centers, and commercial hubs. Unsightly manufacturing and industrial facilities have been relegated to the less habitable zones, or beneath the planet's surface.

The extreme northern and southern areas are great plains of crystal and metal buildings covered

with hoarfrost. Plumes of steam curl upward from heating and ventilation systems. Transportation conduits from the northern to the southern areas of the planetwide city are so efficient that people can live near the arctic circle and attend weekly meetings at the Imperial Palace.

The polar caps are the planet's only water reservoir. All inland seas and oceans have been drained and consumed over the thousands of years of overpopulation, leaving no other water than what is locked inside the ice. Large stations have been established on the rim of the ice shelves, with huge mechanical borers to mine the ice, self-contained furnaces to melt it, and an intricate network of pipelines to distribute the recovered water. Our amazing recirculating systems and purification facilities connected to the plumbing labyrinths allow for recycling of the vast majority of water used, so that the polar ice caps are only slowly becoming depleted. The Emperor has appointed a powerful commission and workgroup to study this problem.

On the other end of the spectrum, at the planet's equator most of the upper levels of the metropolis are glassed-over greenhouses devoted to agriculture. Fully automated, the agricultural roof-landscapes glint with brilliant reflections visible even from orbit. Our planet is by no means self-sufficient, but the Emperor does what he can to minimize the amount of food and water required from offworld, so that his subjects can keep the fruits of their labor for their own enjoyment and the strengthening of their planetary economies.

The orbital activity around Imperial Center is a constant blur of shuttles arriving and departing, weather and communications satellites, starship construction yards, and military staging areas. The space navigation systems used by every ship in the galaxy are based on the coordinates of Coruscant, defined as zero-zero-zero on all recorded maps.

Pumped up on stimulants and mind-focusing drugs to improve their personal efficiency and to minimize human error, space-traffic controllers crowd around giant holoprojections. These teams monitor the location of each vessel or large piece of debris, tracking its path in a complex interconnected dance that brilliantly keeps the traffic flowing smoothly while avoiding collisions.

Orbiting climate-control mirrors focus sunlight on the extreme northern and southern latitudes of the planet, warming the environment by a few degrees to make more of the land area hospitable. These mirrors are usually monitored and piloted by low-ranking Imperial Navy troopers sworn to do even this grueling duty. Among troopers, "riding the mirrors" is considered the loneliest, most tedious assignment on Coruscant, but all are happy to serve the Empire in whatever capacity they are needed.

Spidery docking and starship repair yards ride high above the planet, providing reconditioning facilities for the largest of spaceliners. Spherical self-contained colony vessels, Imperial Star Destroyers, and huge luxury yachts are built in the space-dock centers. The Emperor has commandeered other, more sophisticated space construction centers in other systems, notably the Kuat Drive Yards and the Rendili and Loronar space construction facilities, for assembling his largest battleships and special weapons platforms.

The most prominent building on the face of Coruscant, indeed the centerpiece of the entire gleaming city, is the Imperial Palace.

The Palace stands like a hybrid cathedral and pyramid, rising higher than any other structure on the planet. Its tallest spires reach up into the rarefied atmosphere, occasionally sparking discharges from the hovering aurorae in the sky. Made of polished gray-green rock and mirrored crystals, the home of Emperor Palpatine sparkles in the hazy sunlight, a fitting example of the glory of our leader.

Even in the deepest hour of night, the Imperial Palace never grows dark. Blazing illumination from phosphorescent panels, glowspheres, and electroluminescence strips keeps the Palace in a shower of shifting light up and down all the corridors.

After Senator Palpatine took on the cowl of Emperor in the crumbling days of the Old Republic, he decided to show clearly the enormous difference between his New Order and the stagnant, thousand-generations-old Republic. The Emperor programmed construction droids to tear down portions of the ancient Presidential Palace and ordered it reconstructed and "enhanced" as a new facility. His Imperial Palace was erected in record time.

The Palace is enormous, with some of its open areas large enough to house a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer. The Palace looms high over the old Senate Hall in an adjacent sector of the city—and the Senate Hall itself towers over everything else on Coruscant.

Within the cyclopean palace, the Grand Corridor is like an enclosed canyon, populated by thousands of bureaucratic functionaries, diplomatic runners, staffers, and ambassadors of all races and species, as well as specialized droids of many fantastic configurations. Insectile maintenance droids ride hoverlifts over the crowds, polishing and cleaning the intricate carvings or richly colored transparisteel insets.

The corridor is lined with exotic purple-and-green ch'hala trees, the transparent bark of which is sensitive to vibrations in the air, responding to each noise with a turmoil of color. The Emperor himself expressed a personal fondness for these trees, claiming that watching their changing hues reminded him of changing patterns in the universe. No one knows the name of the planet from which the ch'hala trees were originally transplanted, or if they were genetically manipulated in the Emperor's finest laboratories.

Above the Grand Corridor, much business is carried out on promenade balconies, where sentient beings sit in high cafés to stare down at the flowing bustle of traffic below. Lift platforms requiring special key access prevent unauthorized creatures from reaching secluded areas. Stormtroopers patrol the corridors, enforcing security and tranquility in the halls of government.

Important visiting dignitaries are housed on the President's Guest Floor, a vestige of the old capitol building that has been engulfed by the much larger Palace structure. These shielded inner rooms are well protected and nearly impregnable from outside attack, should violent criminals from the Rebel Alliance attempt terrorist acts or sabotage.

Deep inside the structure of the Palace, in the most protected rooms at the core of the building, are several "artificial penthouse" suites, with window walls made of projection screens, displaying realistic images from cameras mounted at the top of the Imperial Palace. In this way the Emperor can hold meetings in total security and privacy, yet still enjoy a sweeping view of his planet.

Numerous architectural styles and design motifs can be found throughout the Palace. In some sections the structure is open and airy, with much illumination and transparisteel; other sections are dark and brooding, with carved friezes along the ceiling. Some rooms have old-fashioned hinge doors, made from exotic wood carved with intricate figures.

The Emperor's throne room is a sunken auditorium like a great crater dug into the bedrock. In the audience decks, flat stone benches are arranged in long arcs, where visitors can come to hear Imperial pronouncements directly from the Emperor himself. Acoustics are perfect, allowing the audience to hear the barest whisper from the Emperor; the reverse is also true, and the Emperor is able to hear any question spoken to him from the highest row of benches, even whispered comments from one audience member to another.

At the pinnacle of the throne room is an angled, prismatic skylight, which pours rainbows of light onto the Emperor as he lounges back in his levitating chair, bathing him in glorious colors as he speaks. . . .

The Empire's business never slows down, and some say the Emperor himself never sleeps. Palpatine has many private rooms, studies, audience chambers, libraries, and retiring alcoves hidden throughout the labyrinth of the Palace.

One of his well-known personal haunts is a transparisteel-enclosed observation deck on the tallest spire, where he can recline in a comfortable chair and stare out at the glittering chaos of the world he holds in his benevolent grasp, merely one planet at the heart of a great web of planets that comprises his glorious Empire.

Gone To Ground

The sun had nearly risen above the plateau as a lone figure carried a large bundle into the tent. He checked his breath mask and exposure suit seals, and then placed the bundle at the feet of Ort Hoogra-D'En, the Ho'Din who sat working intently at a table. Hoogra-D'En looked relieved, or at least as relieved as a Ho'Din could look to a human.

"This is the last of them," Tergeth sighed, exhausted after long hours of harvesting tamack pods. He itched from the bites of several bugs that had been trapped inside his suit. Sometimes he wondered why humans bothered to colonize every world imaginable—the only lasting result seemed to be the discovery of yet another species of biting insect.

"We have to finish processing this harvest today,"
buzzed

Hoogra-D'En, in that affected tone he used with outsiders. Tergeth sat at the table and tried to keep himself awake. He admired Hoogra-D'En's perseverance and envied his stamina.

As the sun crawled over the edge of the plateau and the fog melted away, Tergeth finally broke the silence. "I still think the Rebellion can help us," he offered.

"How can they?" Hoogra-D'En hissed. "Their resources are spread too thinly. They win on one front while losing ground on a dozen others and consider it a victory. It does not take a mighty army and a wealth of technology to win a war." Hoogra-D'En rose and paced about the room. "Haven't I shown you otherwise? Single spies go where battalions fear to tread. And if my spies aren't entirely aware that they're working toward my purpose, so be it."

Tergeth had lost this argument many times, yet he still dared to press the issue. "Imperial targets are hard to track. The Rebels could provide useful intelligence ..."

Tergeth's voice trailed off as Hoogra-D'En stared at him, his snake-like hair waving menacingly. Tergeth waited nervously for a reply, paralyzed by the hair's hypnotic motions. Hoogra-D'En finally settled into his chair and said, "This time the Empire will know what it means to feel fear. Dinegia take them! For Anemcoro and every other world they touch, Dinegia take them all!"

• • •

"Sub-Commander Brojtal," Lieutenant Reiss said, crisply raising his arm in salute. Jared Brojtal looked up from his reports. The day had gone well, starting with a tip that led to the capture of seven Rebels and a ship full of stolen medical supplies. Brojtal's career needed a boost; there wasn't much action out here on the Rim, making promotions rarer than corusca stones.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Brojtal replied as he returned the salute.

Lieutenant Reiss wore a sympathetic expression. "It's a message from the Syndaar Military Academy, Sir ... it's about your son," he stammered.

"Don't tell me my only son has failed a class. He knows he has to do his best to get into the Imperial Academy ..." Brojtal saw no mirth on the Lieutenant's face; something serious had happened.

"There was another attack this morning, Sir. Your son was near the blast." The Lieutenant faltered, caught himself and then continued, "It was Hoogra-D'En. Forty-five fatalities in all. Moff Ghundrak posted the bounty upgrade personally ... 50,000 credits. The Moff wants him alive."

Lieutenant Reiss continued, but Brojtal wasn't listening. He wanted to sink into numbness, but his heart demanded something more. Brojtal wasn't going to let Hoogra-D'En get off so easily—but he wasn't high enough in the Imperial command structure to openly engage in a personal vendetta. His hands were tied, unless ...

The lieutenant waited for a few anxious moments and turned to leave, saying, "I'm sorry, Sir."

Brojtal stopped him. "I think it's time I personally went on patrol. All of these Rebels and terrorists frightening the citizens. Something must be done." Brojtal began.

"Sir?" Understanding came into the Lieutenant's eyes.

"I want a list of all ships in-system. Now."

"Irrefutable Logic"

Hesoc was a crack fighter pilot, one of the best. It's said he kept altering his computer records — setting back his date of enlistment — to keep extending his tour of duty. During the Matacorn campaign, Hesoc alone accounted for 18 TIE fighters and four TIE bombers before an interceptor caught him on the wrong side of a "Talon Roll." Somehow, Hesoc managed to bring his damaged X-wing back in. But neither it, nor he were exactly in one piece.

After that, "Hotshot Hesoc" ended up with a cybernetic replacement for his right leg. Under normal circumstances, this would have meant the end of Hesoc's flying career. But Hesoc made it clear he would never accept a training assignment.

Defying orders, he appealed directly to his

Sector Commander, General Lesilk. In his request to remain on active duty, Hesoc argued — in all seriousness — that, "far from being a hindrance, the synthetic limb recently received provides me with an actual advantage over other pilots. In the event of a scramble, I can reach my fighter quicker than most, given I have one sock and one flight boot already on!"

After reading Hesoc's appeal, General Lesilk is said to have smiled and replied, "Who can argue with such irrefutable logic?" Whether "Lockjaw Lesilk" actually cracked a grin on this occasion is not known. Whatever the truth of that allegation is, Hesoc got back his combat slot and the survivors of his squadron are all very glad he did.

ONE THOUSAND LEVELS DOWN

Level 2142 was a bust. Anandra realized it as soon as she stepped up to the counter of "Hangra's Meat Shack," pressed her palms onto the greasy metal to quell the shaking in her arms, and asked the old man tending the grill about the "Centax 3 delivery." He looked at her with confused condescension, like she was lost and out of her depth — which, Anandra supposed, she probably was — and it made her want to drag him over the counter and swear in his face until he somehow made things right.

She didn't yell. She couldn't afford to make a scene. She forced herself to stay calm, to look pathetic and confused and earn the man's sympathy. By the time she returned to her brother — still in the alley where they'd slept the night before — she had her next lead.

Her next hope of escaping the stormtroopers.

The alley was formed by metal rain grates and Anandra settled beside Santiago against the wall, watching shadows cross his face as speeders flitted high

above. She passed him the greasy packets of meat and cheese the old man had given her and waited for the questions to start.

“So are we leaving?” Santiago asked. Anandra balled her hands into fists and didn’t look at him.

“We missed our chance.”

“We shouldn’t have rested,” Santiago said.

At eight years old, he was barely half Anandra’s age, but his bitter determination reminded her of her father.

“The transport left two days ago,” she snarled. “Four hours didn’t make a difference.”

She took a long breath and reached for one of the wrapped packages as Santiago began to eat. She felt hollow and nauseated at the thought of food. “Besides,” she said, “we don’t have to leave Coruscant. The guy said he knew someone on 1997 who might give us shelter.”

“What level are we on now?” Santiago asked.

Anandra didn’t answer. It wouldn’t comfort him, and she didn’t want to argue. Yes, one hundred forty-five levels was a long way on foot; yes, they were both tired; and yes, they had to do it.

They ate in silence until Santiago spat out a chip of bone and said, “I wish we had starblossom.”

He’d spoken almost to himself, but Anandra pressed her thumb into Santiago’s shoulder and wrenched him to face her.

“Well, we don’t,” she said. “We can’t have fruit whenever we want and there isn’t any more starblossom. There isn’t ever going to be more.”

Santiago was trembling. Anandra felt a rush of guilt and pulled away as she snapped, “It’s gone. Just like Alderaan. Get used to it.”

The riots hadn't started as riots. They'd begun as vigils, a way for the people of Level 3204 to grieve for the missing and dead in the wake of the Disaster. Hundreds of locals packed together in the streets, bringing holographic snapshots, handwritten letters, and children's toys to makeshift monuments in parks and community centers. As days passed, however, and official statements and pirate newsfeeds converged on a common truth, anguished wails became cries for justice and revolution.

The planet Alderaan was gone, destroyed by the Empire for crimes no one understood. The Alderaanian people — first- and second-generation immigrants who had shops and restaurants and houses on 3204, who celebrated Coronation Day and imported their favorite fruits from a planet they rarely visited — were alive and frightened and angry. The rest of Coruscant nervously stayed inside and watched the news because Alderaan wasn't, after all, their planet.

Anandra couldn't blame them. She'd never thought Alderaan was her planet, either, until the underworld police and the Imperial stormtroopers came.

When the troops marched into the street and shot her uncle's neighbor Reffe, cutting short his tirade against Imperial corruption, Anandra's mother promised it was over, that no one was going to fight and that the stormtroopers wouldn't make trouble.

"You and Santigo will be safe," she said with a faded smile over breakfast, as she absently bent a spoon in her hands.

She'd already promised that Anandra's father would be fine. That he'd be home on Coruscant as soon as his trade mission was over. Even Santigo hadn't believed that.

"You, I can take," the Pau'an said. The leathery gray skin around his mouth tightened as he grimaced. "You and the boy? This is more difficult."

Level 1997 smelled like soot and human waste. Sparks from industrial compactors drifted lazily to the streets, and lurid signs in pastel pink and blue invited passers-by to sample local "entertainments." Anandra had been to 1997 once before, on a dare with a schoolmate; they'd taken a lift down,

snapped their image with a holocam, then returned skyward. Her parents hadn't found out.

Now she was back, staring down a man with a face like a corpse in a cramped corner of a painfully bright cantina. Santiago stood behind her chair, a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm not leaving my brother behind," Anandra said.

"I sympathize." The Pau'an tipped his own chair back and grinned at his monstrous partner — a hulking black-skinned alien with a mouth wider than Anandra's shoulders and oily quagmires for eyes. Anandra didn't recognize the species.

"Family is family. But I need people to run goods, make deliveries. You can do that, and I can protect you."

Anandra suspected she knew what sort of "deliveries" needed to be made on Level 1997. She could adjust, though. She might have to.

The Pau'an kept talking. "Yet the boy is so little, and can give me nothing. You see my dilemma?"

"I could work for you longer," Anandra said.

The Pau'an sighed and glanced at his companion again.

"I am not sure this is enough. You are both a risk, running from the underworld police..." He paused. "What is your crime again?"

Anandra winced as she heard Santiago's soft, defiant voice. "We aren't criminals."

"Then you have nothing to fear, eh?" the Pau'an said, the stains on his jagged teeth etched by the intense light. He pointed a finger toward the entrance.

Two newcomers had entered the cantina, both in full body armor. They might have been droids, Anandra thought, if it weren't for their swagger. One wore the blue-gray of the underworld police, amber lights gleaming from the sockets

of his helmet. The other wore the white of an Imperial stormtrooper, stark and blinding in the cantina's illumination.

The day after the stormtroopers shot Reffe, security forces began arresting anyone in the streets. Anandra's mother sat on the orange couch in their apartment and cried while Anandra kept Santiago away from the windows. By that time, there was no HoloNet service either — no way to spread news apart from neighbor to neighbor.

The day after that, stormtroopers began going door to door. Rebel spies, they said, had been recruiting locals, and anyone born on Alderaan needed to be taken in for questioning.

Rumor was that second-generation immigrants were being given "the benefit of the doubt" and relocated to temporary housing for their own safety.

The young woman who lived next door — the droid mechanic with a chipped front tooth and blond hair who'd babysat Anandra years before — had repeated that particular rumor with a cynical grin.

"That's how I got my first airspeeder," the woman said. "When they relocated the Mon Calamari after the Old Market Sector riots. Dad found this B-14 some poor family left behind."

"I don't remember it," Anandra said. "I was really young."

She shifted her weight from one leg to the other, awkwardly wiped her palms on her hips. "You think they should've run?" she asked. "The Mon Cals, I mean."

"Sometimes you can't know," the woman said. "You just have to wait and hope things get better."

Then she hugged Anandra and slipped back inside her apartment, locking the door behind her.

The rest of that afternoon, Anandra and Santiago stayed close together. Anandra's mother shut herself in the bedroom, but Anandra couldn't hear crying anymore.

Level 1996 was a maze of pipes and catwalks between the compactors above and a humming abyss below. The plating and sluices that canopied the level breathed heat onto Anandra and Santiago as they hurried away from the lift.

The stormtrooper had seen them. He wouldn't be far behind.

Anandra knew she'd made a bad choice. She could've lived with herself, carrying packets of death sticks or spice to the Upau'an's clientele. Santiago was smart and resilient and he could've learned to live with it. But she'd bitten her lip when the Utpau'an had made his final offer, and instead of taking shelter with the gangs of Coruscant she'd pulled Santiago toward the cantina's back exit.

Now they were paying for her squeamishness. The catwalks turned and branched, but there were no walls aside from the curtains of pipework — nothing to hide them from a stormtrooper with heat displays and sensors and who knew what else. Her brilliant plan of "run to the next level and find shelter in the deepest, darkest hole around" was turning out to have flaws.

Anandra stopped on a long, narrow span between maintenance platforms. There was nothing on either side, nothing below except the weird lights and humming sounds of Level 1995.

"You need to run, okay?" Anandra said, turning Santiago to face her.

"What about you?" Santiago asked.

"Don't talk back," Anandra snapped.

She didn't expect her brother to obey, but he did. She looked away and breathed in relief as she heard his footsteps ring on metal into the distance.

Then she put a hand on each guardrail and waited.

When the stormtrooper came out of the lift, his white armor shone like a spotlight. He came without the underworld police officer; that was good. His blaster was still holstered; that was better.

He spotted Anandra in seconds. She stayed put as he wove among the catwalks and arrived on the nearest platform.

“Walk slowly in my direction, please. Hands on your head,” the stormtrooper said. She couldn’t read his tone under the electronic hiss of the helmet.

“I didn’t do anything,” Anandra called.

“Facial ID confirms you’re Anandra Milon, age sixteen, 3204 resident scheduled for relocation. Pre-convicted of juvenile noncompliance. You’ll receive a fair hearing taking into account age and psychological state.”

“You going to stand there, or are you going to arrest me?” Anandra asked. To her surprise, she felt calm. Almost giddy.

The stormtrooper glanced behind him, then back to Anandra. “Come on, kid. You got a raw deal, but it’s not the end of the world.”

“It kind of was,” Anandra laughed, and lowered her knees to the catwalk. The stormtrooper put a hand on his blaster and began to cautiously approach.

“I have to put you in stuncuffs,” the stormtrooper said.

As he reached for his belt, Anandra sprang for the blaster in his holster.

She didn’t try to retrieve the weapon. The trooper would have caught her, broken her wrists and pried the blaster back. She only needed to pull it out of its holster, maintain momentum and release. It went sailing, skidding across the catwalk and quivering at the metal’s edge. For that moment, Anandra had the advantage.

Then the stormtrooper kned her in the chest. She fell back, barely tried to break her fall. He can’t shoot me, she thought. If he killed her now, at least she’d cost him his dignity.

Two solid kicks to her midsection, and her whole body seemed to fold. When he hesitated, she was up again, jumping forward, wrapping her arms around his neck and jabbing her thumbs under the rim of his helmet. His fingers dug into her sides as she tried to crack the helmet's seal. She slammed her head against the black eyeplate, saw red, hoped she'd bought herself a few moments.

Somehow, when her vision came back, she was on the ground and looking up at the stormtroopers unhelmeted face — the face of a scarred, middle-aged man who vaguely reminded her of her uncle. Then the stormtrooper screamed as he rose into the air and plummeted over the railing.

Behind him stood the Pau'an's monstrous partner, nearly too big to fit on the catwalk, flicking stubby fingers as if the stormtrooper had left a residue.

"Level 1782," the creature said, its voice higher-pitched and breathier than Anandra had expected. "You may find shelter there." It stared for another moment before adding, "I had no part in this."

Anandra realized she had the stormtrooper's helmet in her hands. The white surface was stained with her blood. "Why are you doing this?" she asked.

Enormous muscles rolled under skin as the creature seemed to shrug. "You are of Alderaan, yes?" it asked.

"Yes," Anandra said.

"I know what your people suffer," the creature said, and turned away.

When the stormtroopers came to the door of Anandra's apartment, Anandra and Santiago were huddled in the empty fluid bucket of a cleaning droid floating outside their bedroom window. The droid normally washed the building once a week. It had already come two days before, and Anandra guessed she had her neighbor to thank for its change in schedule.

Anandra heard her mother open the door. She heard the static of a stormtrooper's voice. Then she felt the cleaning unit carry them away, and she put an arm around Santiago and tried to focus on her mother's instructions.

They were to go to Level 3108 and find an old friend of the family. Their mother would meet them, and they'd all leave Coruscant together.

Level 3108, of course, had been the first of many disappointments. The "family friend" had offered nothing but excuses and apologies, and finally a promise that a smuggler on 2142 would get them offworld. Santiago hadn't wanted to leave without their mother; Anandra and a close call with the underworld police convinced him otherwise.

They'd been running ever since.

Level 1782 was an endless junkyard walled by scrap metal and overlooked by swaying towers of debris. It was built of crashed airspeeders, decommissioned hovertrains, and broken billboards cast down from their homes in the sky; when a vehicle fell from the upper levels, 1782 was its final destination.

Anandra and Santiago walked together, Santiago clutching Anandra's right wrist. In her left hand she held the dead stormtrooper's blaster. She hadn't put it down since she'd retrieved it from the catwalk.

They'd been exploring the junkyard for nearly an hour, alone except the oversized rats, when a humanoid figure slunk out from behind a rusting tram car. He wore a workman's vest two sizes too large, and his bulging eyes were set at opposite sides of his teardrop head. Anandra knew his species — Mon Calamari — though she hadn't seen his kind for years.

He carried a steel hydrospanner, long and heavy, in one webbed hand. He was probably salvaging junk, Anandra thought, but she remembered the stormtrooper's boot in her chest and she wondered how fast and hard the Mon Calamari could swing.

Anandra pointed her blaster in his direction. "Don't come closer."

The Mon Calamari stopped. Santiago squeezed her wrist and said something, but Anandra wasn't listening. The blaster seemed to twitch in her fingers.

“We won’t hurt you.” Anandra said. “Just give us some food and credits and we’ll head to the next level.”

The Mon Calamari bobbed his head but otherwise didn’t move.

“You said someone would be here to help us,” Santiago whispered. Anandra ignored her brother. She was in control for once, and she didn’t need another disappointment.

“Can you understand me?” Anandra asked, harsher. Her palms were sweating, and she tried to grip the blaster tighter without pulling the trigger.

The Mon Calamari spoke in a guttural voice in a foreign tongue. When Anandra gestured with her blaster, he tried again: “Yes,” he said, spitting and fumbling with the word.

“Don’t hurt him,” Santiago urged.

The Mon Calamari raised his free hand — the one with the hydrospanner stayed at his side — and pointed at Santiago.

“Alderaanian?” he asked.

Out of the corner of her eye, Anandra saw Santiago nod.

“Follow,” the Mon Calamari said, and began to creep backward.

Anandra looked from the barrel of her blaster to the face of the Mon Calamari. She thought of all the ways this encounter could go wrong: he could be a slaver working with the Pau’an, or planning to sell her to the stormtroopers, or he could beat her and her brother to death for no reason at all.

Santiago was watching her. Slowly, she let her breath out and lowered her blaster.

They followed a twisting path through the wrecks and descended a hill of upholstered train seats and window frames toward a great steel cavern. As they came closer, Anandra realized the cavern was the hull of a starship; it must have crashed planetside during some long-forgotten conflict and since

been gutted. What remained was an open space glowing with blue and yellow light.

The hull was filled with makeshift camps, tiny stalls, tents strung with lanterns and batteries, portable stovetops sizzling with grease, buckets full of rainwater, and hundreds of life forms from a dozen species. Mon Calamari roasted mynocks on spits while tattooed near-human children tossed a ball nearby. Anandra spotted a hulking creature she thought, for an instant, was the Pau'an's partner — but its coloring was off.

"Stop," Anandra said, sharper than she expected. She tugged at Santiago, drawing him close. "What is all this?"

"Home," the Mon Calamari said. "Stay. You are expected."

Anandra shook her head in confusion.

Men and women began to emerge from the hull, observing with cautious interest. The Mon Calamari didn't look away from Anandra.

"Mon Calamari," he said, tapping his chest. "Empire takes." Then he gestured behind him.

"Herglic, Empire takes." Another of the hulking creatures was trundling into view.

As the crowd grew, the Mon Calamari pointed to the strangers one by one, naming species and planets Anandra barely knew — names she'd only heard mentioned in muted asides. Then finally, he pointed to her.

"Alderaanian," he said. "Empire takes. But here, we all share."

And whether because of the Mon Calamari's words, or the sad, strained gazes of the people behind him, or the sheer extent of her exhaustion, Anandra dropped her gun and began to weep.

Santiago squeezed her arm again, and Anandra cried like her mother had cried during the riots; she cried without dignity or reason, cried until her nose streamed and strangers guided her into the warmth and safety of the hull.

Santiago clung to her, and when she could speak and reason and act again, she helped her hosts prepare a meal, found a place for her brother to rest and eat.

She knew she would have questions tomorrow. She would need to learn how these people lived, what they hoped for. She would need to share news from the upper levels. She would need to decide whether to give up her blaster or use it against the Empire.

But that night, she could put those concerns aside. That night, she'd found home and family in the depths of Coruscant.

Imperial Alert

The Imperial Navy is searching for a CEC YT-1300 light freighter named the *Millennium Falcon*. According to data gathered from Mos Eisley Spaceport on the planet Tatooine, the *Millennium Falcon* is owned and operated by a Corellian smuggler and former Imperial pilot, Han Solo, and his partner Chewbacca, a Wookiee. The *Millennium Falcon* appears unremarkable but has been illegally modified for increased shield power and speed, and carries military-grade weapons. Imperial authorities most recently sighted the ship at Monastery and Ord Mantell.

Han Solo and Chewbacca are associates of the Rebel Alliance, and are wanted for the following crimes against the Empire:

- Liberation of a known criminal, Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan
- Direct involvement in armed revolt against the Empire
- High treason
- Espionage
- Conspiracy
- Destruction of Imperial property

Han Solo and Chewbacca are considered extremely dangerous. The Empire is offering a bounty of 300,000 credits for their capture. The bounty is for live capture only. The Empire will not be held responsible for any injuries or property loss arising from the attempted apprehension of these notorious criminals.

Anyone with information about the whereabouts of the *Millennium Falcon* and her crew should contact the nearest branch of the Imperial Intelligence Office.

Strike Force Shantipole

1st Rebel: What's that red light mean?

2nd Rebel: It's an Alliance signal receiver. When the light starts blinking, it means we're close to a broadcasting base-homing device.

3rd Rebel: We just follow the signal to its origin. We should be docking in less than an hour.

4th Rebel: Good. The sooner we turn this holo-disk over to Commander Ackbar, the better. Playing mail carrier to outer rim systems isn't my idea of a glamorous assignment.

5th Rebel: I believe this disk is much more important than you realize. Alliance ships are too scarce to be used on frivolous missions.

6th Rebel: And we were specifically ordered to hand deliver the disk directly to Commander Ackbar.

2nd Rebel: Don't forget, I saw Mon Mothma back at the base . . .

6th Rebel: . . . talking to our commander before the briefing. We know. You told us.

2nd Rebel: No really, I did. Just before they gave us the code word.

1st Rebel: What do we need a code word for, anyway?

3rd Rebel: To identify us when we reach Commander Ackbar's base. You don't want them mistaking us for Imperials, do you?

4th Rebel: Um, what was that code word again?

5th Rebel: I believe the commander pronounced it, "Bantha pudu." According to our computer lexicon, the phrase originates with the Huttese culture and means . . .

2nd Rebel: Not now! Plotting a course into an asteroid field isn't easy, you know.

1st Rebel: I never heard of an Alliance base located in an asteroid field before.

6th Rebel: If everyone heard about it, it wouldn't be a secret.

3rd Rebel: It also happens to be the home of the engineers working with Ackbar on his secret project.

4th Rebel: Secrets, everybody's got secrets! Any idea who these engineers are?

5th Rebel: They call themselves the Verpine. I understand the entire race lives within the asteroid field. Roche, I believe the name is.

6th Rebel: They developed that weird-looking starfighter, didn't they?

3rd Rebel: Weird-looking? The B-wing assault ship is one of the most heavily-armed starfighters in the galaxy.

1st Rebel: Hey, what's *that* red light mean?

2nd Rebel: I told you, that's the signal receiver.

4th Rebel: No, that's the full-spectrum transceiver. Three TIE fighters are approaching on our port side.

5th Rebel: Imperials! Why does it always have to be Imperials?

Otherspace

1st Rebel: Hyperspace is so beautiful. The colors remind me of Kallakean rainbows.

2nd Rebel: We get a priority assignment from Alliance High Command and you think about rainbows!

3rd Rebel: Some assignment. So far all we got were jump coordinates and a holodisk.

4th Rebel: Speaking of the holodisk, it's time to play it and get our orders.

GM: A holo-image appears before you and Commander Avalon addresses you. "As you approach the end of your jump, be advised that you are to meet the Alliance transport *Celestial*. You are to take command of the ship and see it to its destination. Further coordinates will be provided in due course."

5th Rebel: How come they never tell us everything all at once? How can we work like this?

6th Rebel: Would you rather jeopardize a mission needlessly by knowing too much? That would work out great if an Imperial interrogator Droid ever got a hold of you.

GM (as Commander Avalon): "The transport carries cargo for an Alliance safe-world — supplies and the like. It also carries Imperial prisoners for transfer to a secure Alliance location. Guard them well and arrive safely. Good luck, and may the Force be with you." The holo-image fades.

3rd Rebel: Imperial prisoners! This is a bigger mission than I imagined.

5th Rebel: And a more dangerous one. One

slip-up and we could be leading the Empire right to one of our safe-worlds.

4th Rebel: Back up a second. What's a safe-world?

1st Rebel: How long did you say you were with the Rebellion? A safe-world is a planet not under Imperial control where the Alliance maintains facilities for the families of the Rebel soldiers.

6th Rebel: On each safe-world, men, women and children not directly needed as combat personnel remain in hiding.

2nd Rebel: They stay safe and the front-line soldiers don't have to worry about their families while they're off fighting the Empire

5th Rebel: Okay, let's get ready. We're about to come out of hyperspace.

1st Rebel: Realspace is so dull compared to the shifting colors along the hyperlanes.

2nd Rebel: Look out! We've emerged in the middle of an uncharted asteroid storm! And you said realspace was dull ...

GM: A round object smashes into your ship's rear section, then goes spinning away in flames. Warning lights flash, but the ship's systems remain on line.

4th Rebel: Those aren't asteroids. They're TIE fighters! And there are dozens of them!

3rd Rebel: A full squadron to be precise, and they're being supported by an Imperial Star Destroyer.

6th Rebel: I don't see any sign of *Celestial*, but those TIEs have noticed us. Prepare to take evasive action.

Celestial's Tale 1: Imperial Escape

Bane Nothos sat waiting, impatiently twisting his massive Imperial signet ring around the first finger of his right hand. He didn't like waiting. He hadn't liked waiting when he had been an Imperial District Commander. He liked waiting even less now, as a prisoner aboard the *Celestial*. What he was waiting for finally happened. The service Droid bearing Nothos's evening meal entered the cell and proffered the dinner tray. Nothos accepted the tray a bit more slowly than usual, allowing the guards to pass by his cell. He squeezed his ring between thumb and forefinger. The ring's single-charge laser proved sufficient to disable the Droid. Nothos reprogrammed the docile mechanical, watched it leave, and sat to eat his meal. One last time, he waited.

Nothos wiped his lips, placing his napkin on his empty dinner plate. The Imperial plate, and napkin were thrown in separate directions amid the metallic shrieks and the tumbling throes of *Celestial* being torn from its course. Nothos smiled. The reprogrammed Droid had done its work. The unsynchronized engines had heated themselves to slag and brought the vessel to a halt.

In the confusion of the disaster and in the dim light of the emergency power system, Bane pushed at the nonfunctioning lock and left his cell. He moved to Grand Moff Ravik's detention cubicle and opened the door. Ravik was standing.

"Situation report, Commander."

Nothos blinked once before replying to Ravik's order. "The *Celestial's* crew is ordinary, Grand Moff. Ordinary men panic when their ship loses power and mobility. Survival becomes paramount."

"Scared men are easy to command," said Ravik, "given the promise of safety."

"Some will stay loyal to Gryphon."

Ravik saw EL-434 silently exit its detention cubicle. A smile twitched on the Grand Moff's face. "I am sure we will think of something, Commander."

Celestial's Tale 2: Exodus

A mutinous crew member applied a medpac to Grand Moff Ravik as the smoke cleared the damaged bridge. Zardra and EL-434 herded the Rebel prisoners to the lower loading dock while Mott and Nothos retrieved what data they could. The pirate gave a long, dramatic sigh which annoyed Ravik nearly as much as his wound.

"She's dead, Moff," said Mott, " *Celestial* has had it. We couldn't build a solid system boat out of what's left."

"Nothos, what have you got on that asteroid or planetoid...whatever...out there," asked Ravik.

Bane Nothos looked out the viewport. He looked back at his sensors. Then back out the viewport, a pause, and then a slight shake of his head. "Grand Moff, I believe the object out there is a ship."

"Abandoned like all the rest? Signs of life?"

Nothos hesitated. "It is not abandoned. But the life scanners are giving confusing readings."

Ravik rose, waving off the aid of the crewman. "Your opinion, Commander."

No hesitation from Nothos this time. "If it's a ship, I can command her."

Ravik looked Nothos over. Celis Mott shifted his attention to a dead readout as Nothos met the Grand Moff's gaze. The pirate waited until he heard a soft noise from the Grand Moff, and then glanced up to see Ravik nod curtly.

"We now have a destination for the life pods. Get us there, Commander."

Celestial's Tale 3: Probe

A voice awoke Ber'asco from thought-sleep. Not the deep, reassuring voice of the Void, but the vibrating rasp of one of the bioscientists. Ber'asco focused most of his eyes on the speaker, now hearing words as well as sound.

"...again. The disease has even invaded our vessel. Our numbers are few enough that —"

Ber'asco's synchronized three-limbed motion silenced the bioscientist. "Pull warriors from death-sleep. Have them report on the pathology of the disease within our vessel. Take warriors and your brethren to their ship. Determine metabolism, biodefenses; form evaluation for resistance to treatment. Prepare the mists. Pull me from thought-sleep when you have or need answers. Now leave me."

The bioscientist prostrated herself, genuflecting on all limbs. Before she had righted herself, Ber'asco sank again into thought-sleep.

Otherspace II

GM: *Interior: Rebel vessel in hyperspace. Camera pans across six Rebels busily working the controls of their vessel preparatory to re-entering realspace, then focuses in on one Rebel, who is clearly worried.*

1st Rebel: Look sharp, people. We'll be coming out of hyperspace in a couple of minutes. I want an immediate reading on the local traffic — and keep your finger on the blaster controls: the place might be crawling with Imperials!

GM: *Cut to different section of ship.*

2nd Rebel: Swell. "Join the Rebellion!" they said. "It's fun!" they said. "Shoot up a billion stormtroopers, hijack a couple hundred freighters, blow away a Star Destroyer or two — then, when the constant brushes with death get you down, you can always go for a nice, relaxing vacation on one of our calm, luxurious safe-worlds!" they said. How come the only time *I* get to go a safe-world, it's crawling with Imperials?

3rd Rebel: Yeah, yeah, very funny. My circulatory organ leaks for you. Just remember — there's a lot more at stake here than just your vacation. There are a lot of wounded Alliance personnel on that planet, not to mention husbands, wives, and children. If the Imperials have found Stronghold ...

GM: *Cut back to first Rebel. Rebel winces as if in pain. His hands clench, and he speaks through gritted teeth.*

1st Rebel: They can't have found it. They just can't.

GM: *Cut to different part of vessel.*

4th Rebel: *(Softly.)* I forgot: he has family on Stronghold, doesn't he? Gods ... *(Louder, with false cheerfulness.)* It could be nothing, right? We don't know of any Imperial ships in the area — so maybe Stronghold has failed to leave messages at the satellite drops because ... because ... maybe their transmitters are out!

5th Rebel: Or lots of sunspot activity, right?

4th Rebel: It could be — sure. Anyway, it could be lots of things besides Imperials.

GM: *Cut to viewport. The hyperspace lines waver, then truncate dramatically into individual stars as the vessel drops back into realspace. Cut to Rebel at scanners.*

6th Rebel: Well, whatever it is, we should know soon. Scanners are clear.

5th Rebel: So are the com channels — not a thing. The base communications center is not responding. That's bad.

6th Rebel: No sign of Imperial ships, though — in fact, there's no sign of any ships at all.

3rd Rebel: All right. We've got work to do. We're here to investigate — so let's go investigate! Make a quick scanning pass, then down to the planet, I guess.

2nd Rebel: And if we run into Imperials?

1st Rebel: They'll wish we hadn't ...

6th Rebel: Something on the screen! It's a two-man Alliance cargo ship, if I'm any judge ... moving fast ... and right at us!

GM (as com voice): This is the Alliance vessel *Meandering Star*! Get out of my way or I'll shoot!

4th Rebel: Energy fluctuation! He's arming his weapons! He's gonna fire!

Ravik's Flight

Pain!

He did not remember such pain, ever. There had been pain, of a different sort, when the first contest with Ber'asco had been fought ...and again, the second time, when victory had been his ... but never like this!

The Rebel scum had brought pain to the very core of his being. He had not given in to the pain, as they must have expected him to, so in a way he had triumphed again. The thought brought new strength.

He awoke, but not from sleep, and found himself running, legs pumping, breath coming in ragged gasps, red mist that was not death mist floating before his eyes. Where was he? He could not remember. But he knew where he wanted to be.

He slowed his flight carefully, moved silently among the rocks, drawing ever closer to his quarry. Food and water were not necessary; this body could operate for long periods without nourishment. He had time. He knew where the hated ones' vessel was. He would board it. And when the time was right, they would die.

35:7:29/TRI/J24S/LAM.4.GRY/GEN

Tombat Strikes During Priole Danna Festival

Gryle City, Lamuir IV

The mysterious art and jewel thief known only as the Tombat is once again on the prowl, and has now added the famed antique slug throwers of jatz performer Fitz Roi to his already considerable swag pile of purloined jewels and priceless antiques. He has also added another system to the 22 systems already seeking his arrest and extradition.

Roi, who was enjoying an unexpected vacation after being bounced from his Core-wide Summerside Tour by sponsor Flangth-2-Go, was invited to perform during the annual Priole Danna Festival on Lamuir IV. Soon after arriving, he reported that his two antique pistols were missing from his hotel suite safe. Investigators found a small blue quella stone in the guns' leather holding case. The low-grade gem, found only on Alderaan and Delaya, is the trademark of a Tombat heist.

Inspectors are being close-mouthed about their progress in the investigation, but if the frustration level at Gryle City's Head Precinct is any indicator, promising leads are not in the offing. It looks like the dashing Corellian-born Tombat has done it again.

The guns, dating from the Old Republic's early Manderon Period, are over 6,000 years old. They are said to have been created on Brentaal by Andel Tanner, a prominent inventor of the era. The pair,

fully functional, is valued by Callia's at over 12.4 million credits, and have been in Roi's family for centuries. When asked why he traveled with such valuable family heirlooms, Roi responded, "Well, I wouldn't get much feddin' good out of the things hanging on the wall at home, now would I?" The pistols were not insured against theft.

TriNebulon News

Raid on Fara's Belt

An example of the disastrous effects of compromised intelligence reports is the Rebel raid on the Imperial communications station in Fara's Belt.

General Dodonna had planned this fighter strike from the moment Admiral Ackbar gave him a squadron of the new, highly sophisticated B-wing fighters. The destination of the attack was an Imperial base, code-named "Understar."

Unknown to the Rebels, Imperial Intelligence had broken the Rebel code and was listening in to Rolion Sector transmissions, and they knew that an Imperial base would shortly be attacked. However, though they knew of the attack, and that it would take place somewhere in Rolion sector, they didn't know which of their 752 bases there was Understar.

Imperial Intelligence's Major Herrit, in an uncharacteristically brilliant move, came up with a plan to trick the Rebels into telling

them where the attack would be. He contacted every Imperial installation in Rolion sector and told each to report some sort of common systems malfunction to the central Imperial HQ. Each installation was given a different malfunction to report: Chirion Base had "environmental problems;" Lobaq Station had "power supply problems;" and so forth.

Then Herrit waited.

When Imperial Intelligence intercepted a Rebel transmission stating that "Understar" had a "gravitational fluctuation malfunction," Herrit knew that the target of the Rebel attack was the communications station in Fara's Belt.

When Dodonna's B-wing squadron dropped out of hyperspace above the Imperial base, they were immediately surrounded and attacked by an overwhelming number of TIE fighters.

No Rebel ships escaped.

Uhl Eharl Khoehng

Twin tridents of lightning surged across the low-lying skies of Iscera. The congested atmosphere bled through in clotted tones of red and orange, as volatile gases reacted with the charged violence of the storm. Torrential gusts of wind and wet snow buffeted the hull of the Prodigal, layering the freighter with a secondary armor plate of thick ice. Bearing no exterior signature or running lights, the YT-1300 sat alone on an exposed pad, isolated from the main traffic of the Isцерian spaceport.

Lightning briefly illuminated the interior of the Prodigal's bridge. Fable Astin sat tentatively, contemplating the storm. Exhausted and sickened, the young Jedi ran her fingers through the matted tangle of her hair, draping the unruly mane over her shoulders. The tapered waistline of her flight jacket accentuated her slender waist and the lengthy lines of her legs and thighs. She winced irritably, shifting position to relieve the pinch of her gray pirate leggings, which had gathered in the backs of her knees. The slight motion rattled the heavy blaster at her hip and caused the lightsaber to fall into the cushion beside her.

Fable flipped the comm switch for the tenth time, waiting for the computer to bring up the stored message from the ship's logs. The featureless image emerged from the mini-holovid, realigning itself into the face and upper torso of a woman. Prematurely gray with the burden of command, auburn hair curled at the shoulders of her uniform, which bore the insignia of a Rebel Alliance officer. "Greetings Captain Astin and to your Harrier Infiltration team. This is Commander Beatonn of the Rebel frigate, V'nnuk'rk." Beatonn paused briefly, interrupted by the distant blare of a proximity alarm. "Your objective is very clear, captain. The Empire has begun construction on a communications bunker on Nysza III. Your orders are to destroy the bunker before it can be completed. Good luck, captain, and may the Force be with you. " The holo-communication ended amid static discharge and interference.

Fable toggled the erasure switch, deleting the transmission. It was a duty long overdue. Nearly 17 hours had passed since the completion of their objective, which had resulted in the untimely death of her technical officer, Arecelis Acosta. "Did you know that he was half human?"

"I'd heard rumors," Deke Holman replied. The auxiliary control lights cast a surreal aura over his handsome but grim face and the shock of fiery, red hair crowning his cumbersome head. A Socorran, he was dark-skinned and rugged, wearing the traditional gold hoop in his left ear lobe. Still damp from their misadventure on Nysza III, he leaned forward and stared into the holographic etching secured on the viewscreen. He recognized his own stout figure, framed on each side by his companions. On the right, his captain and friend, Fable Astin, smiled as he tickled her neck. To the left, Arecelis Acosta was playfully feigning a punch.

The Coynite was nearly 2.2 meters tall, powerfully built at the chest and shoulders. His body was covered with a fine blanket of blue-black fur, which was intricately braided around his neck and ears. In the etching, his thick fingers grasped at Deke's forearm, easily making the circumference of his flesh. Arecelis' other hand was balled into a fist as the Coynite feigned an incoming punch.

Deke shook his head, thoughtfully pursing his thick lips. "I'm really going to miss him." He sniffed disdainfully, slumping against the back of the acceleration chair. "No wonder there was no security in that bunker. Who would have thought a Jedi would be there?" Rubbing his forehead, he sighed, "At least you were with us."

"Didn't do Arecelis much good," Fable scoffed. Her body was bruised from her momentary encounter with Vialco, a dark Jedi assigned to the garrison. One feint and one block was all he needed to launch her across the width of the construction corridor. Trembling with rage, all Fable could do was stare up at him, as his mocking laughter echoed through the empty ceiling tiles above the complex. Her limited skills were no challenge to him and she had undermined herself by drawing her lightsaber in anger, opening herself to the dark side.

"Smells like a gundark crawled into the nav computer and died. It reeks in here!" The exasperated Jedi threw her gloves onto the console, acutely aware of the stench permeating the bridge. During their escape from the bunker, they had been forced to dive into a construction tunnel full of stagnant water. The scent was prolific. "We need to get out of here. Is there a bar or something in town?"

"This is pretty much a dry world, capt'n," Deke replied. "But when I went to pick up those rations, I passed a little theater on the boulevard. Evidently, it's the last show before the winter break and the owners are giving away tickets."

"Did you get any?"

"Didn't have much of a choice. The kid nearly knocked me down, trying to give the last two away."

"What's it called?"

Posing valiantly, Deke stood up and put his hand over his chest. In a deep voice, he declared, "For the Want of an Empire."

"Wonderful," Fable grumbled, leading the way out of the flight cabin. "I can't wait to see this."

* * *

Against the elaborate backdrop of the stage, the clashing of swords echoed from the inner recesses of the set. The dual ended abruptly, with the edge of one prop sword slicing cleanly through the other, detonating the small

charge inside to provide the dramatic effect of a lightsaber exploding through metal. Panting and fatigued, the actors separated, retreating to the far edges of the mock cave.

Fable focused on the mesmerizing movements of the lead actor. A subtle trick in the theater lighting enhanced the malevolence of his character, a tragic hero bent on destroying his one-time friend and companion. Captivated by the last moments of the scene, she sat on the edge of her seat, waiting for him to speak.

The audience gasped as the sword sliced the air only millimeters from one actor's face, feigning the dreaded death blow. As his rival died at his feet, the hero turned toward the audience. "Come my good fellows," he announced in a clear, resonating tone, "let us part this sad scene, and through our good company, make the journey shorter." The curtain closed as the stagehands emerged to reset for the final act.

Fable sat back in her chair. "Did you see that?" She covered her mouth, laughing anxiously into her hand. "His technique is almost flawless." Scanning the glossy holo-program, she whispered, "What's his name?"

"Jaalib Brandl."

"I want to meet him." Turning on the wary Socorran, she squeezed his knees tightly. "You speak Iscerian, don't you? Talk to the owner."

Grumbling under his breath, Deke moved away from his seat and toward the aisle. "I'll see what I can do."

Through most of the final act, Fable sat with the actor's image across her lap, comparing the picture with every minute expression of his youthful, almost adolescent face. The Force was with him and she felt it, moving through the audience with a tangible presence.

She marveled at the dangerous parallel dimensions of reality and the play, where a young councilman began a slow rise into the inner circles of high government, only to discover corruption in every facet of its existence. In act two, he initiated a campaign to end the deterioration of the bureaucracy. But as his vision expanded in the third act, it became a ruthless autocracy, bent on exterminating its enemies and all who opposed it.

For the final scene, the hero stood alone in a splintered universe of his creation, devoid of hope, life, family, or friends. In a final affirmation, gazing out over the audience, he briefly met her eyes and held her captive. On his dying breath, he gasped, "For the want of an empire... all humanity was lost."

Collapsing to the stage floor, the hero perished amid a thunderous echo of applause. Fable was one of the first to stand, eagerly applauding the performance, and joined the audience's shouted accolades as the minor characters returned to the stage to take their bows. From the side wall, she spotted Deke waving for her to join him in the aisle.

"Come on," Deke whispered, leading her out of a side door. "Most of the actors stay and hobnob with the audience; but a stagehand told me that Brandl's already heading back to his quarters."

"There he is!" Fable shouted, as the door slammed shut behind them. "That's him!" she gushed, recognizing the actor's costume robes. "Brandl!" she shouted, sliding down the icy stairwell. "Jaalib Brandl?"

The actor hesitated as the young woman scampered across the ice toward him. She was moving too rapidly for the footing, sliding precariously with every stride. Dropping his bag, Jaalib stepped forward as her legs slipped from beneath her, anchoring the young woman in his arms. "That was quite an entrance," he teased.

"That was quite a performance!" Fable countered. Flushing crimson with embarrassment, she stepped away from him and laughed nervously, covering her reaction with a smile. "Where did you learn to use a sword like that?"

"An actor needs a variety of exotic skills," Jaalib replied with a grin. "It's the only way to insure longevity in this profession." Retrieving his bag, he whispered, "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a long flight ahead of me tomorrow. Good night, Miss... Miss...".

"Fable. Fable Astin."

"Good night, Miss Astin." His smile deepened. "Fable."

"Good night," Fable sighed, watching the outline of his robes vanish in the shadows of the theater courtyard. Teeth chattering, she stared into the darkness for a long moment.

"Come on, Fable!" Deke complained. "It's freezing out here. Let's get back to the ship."

* * *

The pressure in Fable's lungs was building rapidly.

Trapped

by stormtroopers in the construction tube, she was desperate to find a quick escape for her infiltration team. They were 15 minutes off schedule with a load of thermal detonators on their backs, each timed to go off in less than 40 minutes, regardless of their safety. If they did not reach the objective site soon, no one would be alive to complete their mission.

Fable reached in front of her, tapping Arcelis on the shoulder. As the Coynite turned, his features began to distend and shift, blending into the harsh, angular jaw of Vialco, the dark Jedi they would later encounter in the command station. "Had you given yourself to the passion, he might still be alive," he taunted. "Your feelings can do little for him now." Yanking the lightsaber from her belt, Fable lunged savagely. She faked a left feint, deftly bringing the lightsaber down and across to the right.

"That's it, girl! Anger is the control. Your fear is the power. And your fear is great, little one." His voice reverberated through the darkness, washing over her consciousness. "You have taken your first small steps toward the ultimate ecstasy. Now awake and open yourself to the true power."

He's in my room! Fable thought frantically, struggling with the nightmare. The lightsaber flared in her grip, burning her hand, and she dropped it to the floor. As the weapon clanked against the deck plates, Fable woke frantically to find herself standing in the center of her cabin. She recoiled in horror when she saw her seared palm. Dropping to the floor, Fable curled into a fetal ball on the floor and rocked from side to side, desperate to quell the pain. The young Jedi called on the power of the Force to control the injury; but the throbbing wound's anger did not subside, nor did she feel the sense of inner peace that came with the summoning of the Force.

Fumbling with the light control beside her bunk, Fable cradled her injured hand against her. She snatched the lightsaber from the deck and threw it into the mirror, shattering glass fragments across the small personal gear locker. Stumbling to the sink unit, she tripped the sensor; stifling a scream as the jets blew cool, moist air over the cauterized wound. As the soothing jets blew over her and her tears, she slumped to the floor. In one moment of grief, one step from the path of light, she had changed the course of her future, betraying herself, her love of the Jedi, and the teachings of her mother.

On the table beside her bunk, the holo-image of her mother grinned inanely at her. In the fragmented remains of the mirror, Fable saw that same face, younger and smoother; but there was something noticeably sinister about the features - - her features.

"Fable!" She heard the frantic pitch in Deke's voice as the Socorran hurried through the cabin hatch. Pulling herself up from the floor, she slowly moved along with him as he guided her to the bunk. "What happened?" he gasped, examining the ugly wound carved into her flesh.

"It was him," Fable whispered. "He was here."

"Who?" the Socorran demanded, wrapping the burn in sterile gauze.

"Vialco. At least that's what he calls himself." She winced as the burn pulled at the tender skin. "He's coming for me. To turn me to the dark side. And there's nothing I can do to stop him!"

Ignorant of the Jedi's true troubles, Deke snarled, "You know I'll go down with you, capt'n. What do you need me to do?"

Hiding her frightened face beneath the shadow of her long hair, she whispered, "Deke, I need you to run a background check on Jaalib Brandl. Do you have access to the civilian database?"

"Having access and getting access is the same thing to me. But how's that going to help, Fable?"

"Please Deke, I can't explain it right now," she whispered, perceiving the jealous glint in his eyes.

Deke nodded, rising to his feet. "I'm on it."

Heavy snow blanketed the exterior lots of the Iscera spaceport, throwing layer upon downy layer over the hulls of the freighters docked in the outer arena. The steady flow of large, cumbersome flakes cut visibility nearly in half, hampering Fable's efforts to see through the viewscreen into the internal docking bays nearby. "What have you found?" she asked, sitting down in the co-pilot's chair. A cup of soup warmed her good hand, bringing a small measure of strength to her exhausted body.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Deke sighed. Staring into the terminal, he watched the information scroll across the screen. "The civilian logs don't show very much. Jaalib Brandl, 17 years old, orphaned at age 12. No known relatives within the Imperial sectors. Lived with a family friend, Otias Atori, and then left to pursue a career in theater. There were no records of him even existing before the age of 12." He sat back in the chair. "That's when I got suspicious."

"Suspicious?" Fable probed. "Why?"

"The Imperials have a sneaky practice of creating people, swapping records to implant operatives among the populace. The only way to trace them is through their records. If you look hard enough, every once in a while," he smirked confidently, "you'll find a hole."

"Like no records before a certain age?"

"Uh-huh. So I started cross-referencing in that Imperial database we intercepted. Only I forgot to use his first name. Look what came 'up." The image of an older man appeared on the screen. There was a brooding, sinister edge to his handsome face, a piercing glare and an arrogant smirk that gave the impression that he was posing. "See any family resemblance?"

"Lord Adalric Brandl," Fable read the information. "An actor?"

"And this was his biggest and best role yet." Deke tapped the control panel. A restricted information bar flashed across the screen as he accessed the code.

Fable set her cup aside, afraid that her trembling hands might spill the hot liquid into her lap. "An Imperial Inquisitor? Brandl's father is a Jedi- killer?"

"The Alliance has official notices about this maniac all over the network. Avoid at all costs, executive order 2354. This guy was bad news."

"Was?"

"Evidently Brandl went rogue and took off, prompting a galaxy-wide manhunt. They found him," Deke shuddered, "following a string of corpses that he left from one sector to the next. And when they finally caught him, he went berserk and committed suicide." The status line scrolled over the image of Brandl's face, flashing the word "deceased" across the screen.

"What's that?" Fable pointed to the corner of the terminal.

"It's an Imperial code about notifying next of kin. This one means the body was never recovered."

"Never recovered? Never recovered by the family or never found?"

"Can't tell you, capt'n: Wasn't there."

Fable strummed her fingers lightly against her thigh, feeling the lightsaber's slight weight against her hip.

"I've seen that look before," Deke grumbled pensively. Fumbling with the control panel, he reached into the mass confusion of the circuitry boards beneath the shield generator controls and retrieved a dusty bottle of Socorran raava. "Here," he gave it to her. Then removing the earring from his lobe, he handed the golden hoop to her as well. "I noticed the port manager is Socorran. Give him the earring and tell him you need a ship. Then give him the bottle and let him know that he can discuss the terms with me."

Fable wiped at her cheek, feeling the moisture beneath her fingertips. "You're a good friend, Deke." -

"That's what they tell me," he sighed, propping his legs against the console. "Now go on," he fussed, "before I change my mind."

Quietly, Fable walked into the corridor beyond the flight bridge.

"Fable?" Deke whispered, as she hesitated, lingering beneath the bulkhead. "If Brandl's alive, he's got nothing to lose."

"At this point, Deke, neither do I."

* * *

The hyperdrive cue pulsed, startling Fable to consciousness. She rubbed at the bruise swelling on her forehead where she had knocked it soundly against the canopy of the X-wing. "No bad dreams?" she sighed with a half smile. From above, an abrupt movement distracted her and before she could utter one sound, the body of Arecelis came crashing through the cockpit shield, bringing the icy grasp of space. As the air was drawn from her lungs, Vialco stood over her, straddling the cockpit and mocking her with his deep, throaty laughter.

Fable shrieked, slapping hysterically at the mutilated corpse cradled in her lap; but there was nothing there. Frantically craning her neck to get a full view of the outside canopy, she saw nothing but the brilliant lines and colors of hyperspace, as they began to retract into the tell-tale pinpoints of distant planets and stars. Reeling from the traumatic nightmare, she collapsed against the acceleration chair.

The emerald-gold face of Trulalis emerged before her as the X-wing materialized from hyperspace. Quickly engaging the engines, she braced for the atmospheric entry. Scanning her sensors, Fable checked the data screens, which were inundated with immediate life sign readings. The sensors began tracing the ion signature, automatically pinpointing the trace of a light shuttle. Setting a similar course, she eventually landed outside the perimeter of a small settlement.

From the ground, Trulalis was breathtaking and majestic. Fable found herself captivated by the noble black trees whose leaves radiated a green hue when struck by direct sunlight. With massive, arching branches, the trees formed a shaded corridor above the overgrown trail. Enjoying the quiet walk, Fable rechecked her sensor information, confirming that the life signs she had received were mostly animal in nature. The settlement structures the computer had uncovered were void of any life. As she came closer, it was apparent why.

Strewn about the outskirts of the common, she found the remains of stormtrooper armor. There were no bodies inside, but the unmistakable blast scoring across the chests were disturbing evidence of a failed retaliation against the Empire, as were the skeletal remains of their victims, which were half-buried in the loose top soil nearby. At the settlement gates, she stared into the desolate streets where wreckage and debris were scattered from one end of the broad avenue to the next.

The body of a small bantha lay in the doorway of a narrow shelter. Shrunken and thin, its thick hide had been preserved by the nurturing Trulalis soil. Manicured gardens had gone to seed, spreading erratically over the front lawns and the dilapidated remains of the abandoned cottages. In one shelter, Fable found the transport shuttle, which had been assigned to Jaalib - she knew she was on the right track.

The only true survivor of the Imperial onslaught sat in the center of the settlement. Its shadow stood over her in silent testament of its endurance. Fable stared up and up, until her eyes could take in the enormity of the ancient theater. Blast scoring had scarred the pristine limestone obelisk, leaving a blemish of tragedy etched into the elaborate design. Hemmed in by stone fences and gates, the gardens were immaculately trimmed and manicured, tapered back from the winding garden paths, which wound and curved into the enormous entrance. Two stone pillars framed the central portal, casting grotesque, disembodied shadows over the archway.

Mustering her courage, she stepped into the immense antechamber. Her eyes took in the magnificence of tapestries and display cases, each showing the relics of prop swords, ornate jewelry, and costumes used in the various stage productions. She heard voices echoing from the right wing and followed instinctively, attuned to the familiar strength of Jaalib's voice.

"You are a thief, a liar, and a pawn!" Jaalib spat in a frantic voice. Fable hesitated in the doorway, staring across the darkened auditorium.

"A thief? A liar? A pawn?" another voice commented. "Are these not the greatest virtues of any good king?"

"Virtue-" Jaalib broke off, his face contorted in an uncharacteristic mask of rage.

"Your concentration is off," the stranger whispered. "Perhaps we're moving too quickly."

"No, it's me!" The despondent sound of his voice echoed in the dusty spaces above the stage. "I keep seeing you, hearing you play the part and then," he stumbled, "I see my own clumsy attempts." Anxiously brushing a hand through his dark hair, he managed a weak smile. "Perfection is never easy, Father, especially when it's your perfection."

From his throne, in the shadowed backset of the stage, Adalric Brandl chuckled softly. The rustling of his cumbersome, black robes sent whispering vibrations over the front rows as he stepped down from the raised dais. "Of all the tragedies ever conceived, Uhl Eharl Khoehng is the greatest," Brandl said with conviction. "The role of the Edjian-Prince is the most difficult and the actor who plays it," he paused, "is assured greatness."

"How old were you? The first time you performed it?"

"I was nearly 30 before Otias would even permit me to read for the part." Brandl snorted with warm pleasure. "You are a young man, Jaalib." Placing a comforting hand on Jaalib's shoulders, he whispered, "You were born for this part. Give yourself time to grow into it."

Recognizing Brandl's profile, Fable slowly walked down the center aisle toward the stage. Hands crossed shamefully in front of her, she met Brandl's curious eyes as his gaze fell over her. "Lord Brandl..." she faltered, staring into the shadows.

"Fable!" Jaalib hissed. Jumping down from the platform, he charged her, robes billowing from his shoulders. "What are you doing here?" Fable could hear his voice, but only distantly. She could feel the harsh pinch of his fingers on her wrists, but felt no pain. Caught in Brandl's intense gaze, she could not move. His presence was overpowering and Fable found herself deeply intrigued by the somber charm and magnificence of this strange man, himself a tragic hero, trapped in the torrent of some inconceivable drama.

Her eyes cautiously traced the noble angle of his forehead and brow, noting the gentle curvature of his nose, his mouth, and the regal set of his chin. Faint laugh lines framed thin, pale lips, fading into the surrounding tautness of his cheekbones. Waves of black hair betrayed streaks of silver running through

the closely cropped sides, shadowing Brandl's solemn face. At his right temple, obtuse veins of scar tissue erupted from the otherwise smooth skin, winding a cruel path around the outer edges of his eye. Severely traumatized, the eye itself was damaged, sheathed in the pupilless, irisless remains of a clear, yellowed orb.

"Fable!" Jaalib shouted, shaking her.

"Jaalib," Brandl whispered, "mind your manners. An audience, even an audience of one, is always to be treasured and respected."

Glaring at her, Jaalib hissed, "You shouldn't have come here!" Fable glanced at him briefly and then moved away, refusing to acknowledge that she agreed with him.

"An admirer, Jaalib?"

"Yes, Father, but she was just leaving." Before Jaalib could herd her back up the aisle, he felt the light restraint of his father's hands.

Drawn to the innocence of the young woman's frightened eyes, Brandl closed the distance between them. With hesitation, he caressed Fable's smooth cheek, gently lifting her chin to raise her eyes. Astonished by the strength in her gaze, Brandl smiled pleasantly. "There is no frailty here," he whispered with a narcissistic grin. His eyes narrowed dubiously as he took her bandaged hand, warming her cold fingers in the warmth of his touch. "The dark side beckons with the promise of easy gain; but there is always a price, always a tribute to its passion."

Fable swallowed, struggling to find her voice. "I... I," she stammered, "Lord Brandl, I need you... to..."

"Weigh your words carefully, young woman, do not waste time counting them." Turning to Jaalib, he gently pressed her toward his son. "Jaalib, take our guest to a comfortable room. She will stay the night."

Shoulders hunched in rage, Jaalib led Fable up the wide aisle, leading her out of the grand hall auditorium.

* * *

An excruciating cramp in her leg brought Fable to consciousness. She bolted frantically from the bed, scanning the shadows for signs of movement. Taking her lightsaber from beneath the pillow, she assumed the ready stance, waiting for the unseen phantom to strike. But there were no shadows to fight, except her own. "No bad dreams?" Stiff from the close quarters of the X-wing, she felt surprisingly well and rested. Snorting softly, Fable sat down on the bed. "No bad dreams!" she cheered into her pillow. Her optimism was short lived as a knock sounded at the door. Momentarily, the latch cleared and the door parted. Pulling the blanket over her body, Fable swallowed a moment of fear, relieved when Jaalib's brooding face peered into the chamber.

"The morning meal is ready," he growled.

"I'll be right there." As the door closed, she hurried from the bed and dressed quickly. Ignoring her flight jacket, she pulled the fine linen shirt over her head and shoulders, leaving the long ends to hang over her leggings. In the darkened corridor outside her room, Jaalib was waiting. "This way."

As the sweet aroma of sausage and boiling cereal filtered through her nostrils, Fable's stomach rumbled appreciatively. Painfully aware of her hunger and the young actor's annoyance, she waited for him to sit down at the small table. A series of large flame ovens lined the back of the room behind him. Fable waited until Jaalib took the first bite, then eagerly began filling her plate with steaming broth and several links of sausage.

Hearing only the clang of her utensils, she looked up to find Jaalib glaring at her. There was a deep-seated loathing behind his eyes. Gazing about the small, crude kitchen, she realized that they were alone. "Where is Lord Brandl?" she whispered, hoping he would ignore her.

"You shouldn't have come here!"

Piqued by his cruel tone, Fable slammed her fork against the plate. "Why don't you just butt out of it!"

"He won't help you," the actor snarled. "Others have come. Like you. So why don't you just get your things and I'll walk you back to your ship."

"I said, where is he?" Fable hissed with premeditated venom.

"He's in the Barrows," Jaalib relented. "He's been waiting for you."

"The Barrows?" she questioned around a mouthful of hot broth.

"The graveyard."

Outside in the cold dawn, storm clouds swept the sky. Wishing for her flight jacket, Fable shivered, hugging herself as the cool breeze fluttered through her hair and the thin fabric of her shirt. Trotting up the back landscape of steps and garden porches, she wandered into the rear courtyards of the theater, needing no specific direction to follow the dark presence of Lord Brandl. She followed a short path to the outskirts of Kovit, where the earth rose and fell in an irregular series of earthen mounds and grassy knolls. Up the steepest mound, she halted on the crest, finding herself surrounded by wax cylinders, hundreds of them, mounted atop slender pedestals, which were buried in the soft ground. Metallic ball bearings were precariously perched on each cylinder, giving the appearance of small, blue flames.

Across from her, on the opposite mound, Brandl stood with his back to her, at the foot of an enormous sarcophagus. The grainy image of a woman had been carved into the lid, delicately outlining the lace and fabric of the gown she was laid to rest in. "The Jedi is his own worst enemy," Brandl declared. "The greatest conflict comes from within. Our Masters teach us, scold us," he hesitated, "command us to follow reason, not our emotions."

"You disagree?" Fable asked, stepping into the center of the wax cylinders.

"Where there is smoke, there is fire." Brandl straightened, staring down his nose at her for a long moment. "Vialco is a coward. His tactics are mere illusions, prey for the weak-minded."

Brushing off the possible insult, Fable shrugged. "But he is powerful." Shaking her head remorsefully, she whispered, "I can't beat him. At least, I don't think so."

"Losing is not an option... it's a conscious decision. You will not know until you try."

"Trying isn't good enough! I have to succeed or-" "Or he may succeed in his attempts to lure you to the dark side? How do you know that I will not turn you?"

Fable felt a tremor down her back. "I don't."

"The student's greatest achievement is attained through succession," Brandl began, "a succession which requires the destruction of the Master. This is what the dark side teaches us. But what you must always remember is that when we embrace the darkness, we are already masters in the design of fate, humbling ourselves as students." He leaned heavily against the massive stone tomb. "When we seek the dark side, we seek our doom. Too often, we are successful."

"So you'll help me?"

"Vialco's undoing is inevitable. Even I have seen this."

"So I'll win, right?"

Brandl gently tugged at the clasp of his robe, loosening the collar. "If you're looking for visions; Fable, sit quietly and dwell on your past. Now prepare yourself. See the ball bearing directly ahead of you, sitting atop the wax cylinder? Draw your lightsaber and strike it. Destroy only the metal bearing. Leave the wax unharmed."

Fable hesitated, deliberately slow in assuming the ready stance. Breathing with effort, she stared at the ball bearing, her wounded hand tingling from her last experience with the lightsaber.

"The dark side's influence is stronger in moments of weakness. Do not let yourself be distracted. Now strike."

Fable drew the lightsaber from her belt, concentrating on its ignition. Swinging in a wide arc, she struck at the ball bearing, elated as it evaporated into nothingness, leaving the wax cylinder slightly scorched but unharmed. She disengaged the weapon and resumed the ready stance, unable to hide the arrogant smirk etched across her features.

"When climbing great mountains, it is always best to begin at a slow pace," Brandl remarked quietly. "Now strike for two." Without waiting to focus on the pedestal's position, she ignited the lightsaber and struck two blows, swinging the blade toward the ball bearings and disintegrating them as the cylinders remained untouched. Overwhelmed with confidence, she

again disengaged the weapon and resumed the ready position, eager to begin the next phase. "No gain comes without a price. I will be your mentor and you my pupil. You will forever carry the distinguishment of my presence, as well as the taint," he stumbled over the word, "the traits of my own Masters."

"You mean the Emperor," Fable whispered, "don't you?"

"I chose the path that led me to this life," Brandl continued, "I will lead you on a parallel course, where I will show you the glories of the light and the majesty of the dark." He nodded, indicating the next alignment of wax cylinders. "Now strike for 10."

Fable faltered for a moment; then fresh with the assurance of her performance, she ignited the lightsaber and charged, working her way through the line. As she reached for the fourth cylinder, she felt herself floundering. Furiously struggling to the fifth, she sliced neatly through the cylinder and knocked the ball bearing at her feet. In a failed attempt to rally for the sixth, she tripped and fell into the wet earth, taking several stands and cylinders with her.

Brandl slowly descended from the mound, stepping just inside the perimeter of the training circle. Shamefully rising to her feet, Fable flinched as he drew his lightsaber and moved toward her. With a resonating power that spread out from it in all directions, the lightsaber became a smear of brilliance as Brandl worked his way through the wax cylinders. He destroyed one ball bearing after another, leaving no perceptible mark on the wax. Fable watched in awe as the weapon danced through a score or more of ball bearings before Brandl completed the cadence and disengaged the weapon. Gawking at the craftsmanship, she turned to Brandl. "You really are a Jedi Master."

"Only fools admire what they see," he hissed evenly, brushing past her. "I know... for once I was a fool." The first drops of rain began to fall, quickly covering the barrows with a slick film of water and loose earth. "You will

continue this exercise until you have mastered it properly. Only then may you return to the theater."

"And if I can't," Fable insisted.

"You know where your ship is docked. Don't hesitate to go back to wherever it is you came from." He left her alone, with no further comment.

Nearly eight hours later, Fable walked through the stormy deluge of rain, listening to the frigid drops against her shoulders. Every chafing step brought her closer to the theater and closer to a temper tantrum of monumental proportions. Jaalib was waiting for her at the door with a modest smile and a warm blanket. "He asks the impossible!" she hissed.

The actor draped the blanket over her shoulders. "Your dinner's getting cold."

Fable pushed through the door of her room, startled to find a heavy plasteel tub in the center of the floor, steaming with hot water. "A bath?" she whispered wearily. "Oh," she groaned, stumbling across the floor, discarding boots, socks, and belt as she moved across the room. About to pull the muddy shirt over her arms, Fable hesitated, feeling a draft from the door, where Jaalib stood, watching her. "Do you mind?"

Flushing with embarrassment, he stepped back into the shadows. "I'll bring your dinner later," he stammered and closed the door behind him.

* * *

As its orbital axis began its seasonal tilt, Trulalis was thrust into a tempestuous season of torrential rainfall and thunderstorms. Dawn showers became steady downpours by the afternoon, flooding the gutted lowlands with muddy water and the persistent rumble of thunder. Above the biting autumn breeze, the hum of a lightsaber was interrupted by the rattle of falling pedestals, wax cylinders, and ball bearings as Fable blundered through the exercise.

Brandl watched with mounting dissatisfaction. As the last pedestal fell to the saturated earth, he stormed down from his high mound. "You little fool! Do it again!"

Fable braced herself against the malevolent voice, glaring at the ground, too frightened to meet Brandl's cruel eyes. Despite a streak of improvement, she was steadily losing ground and his frustration was proof of that, as were the whispered obscenities spoken vehemently under his breath. She watched his broad, swaying shoulders as the Jedi Master started back up the mound to his stony, sarcophagus throne.

"How eager you young upstarts are to give yourself to the Force, demanding tribute from it, as if you were the source of the power. The Force does not thrive on the basis of whether you live or breathe! It exists because it has always been so! Begin again!"

Grateful to the rain for hiding her tears of humiliation, Fable tucked the lightsaber into her muddy leggings and started up the opposite mound. Defying Brandl's command, she headed for the dark solace of the theater, where Jaalib would be waiting for her with a warm blanket and a much needed kind word.

Enraged by her failure to comply, Brandl pursued her, throwing accusations and threats of retribution. Though Fable had seen only traces of it, she recognized the temperament and arrogance that must have been the beginning of Brandl's descent into the Emperor's power. And though she felt numb from the onslaught of his dreary emotions, she had transcended his mental barriers and become an admiring witness to the dedication and devotion that had kept him whole through the trial of his life. He was a man who would stop at nothing to accomplish his goals and he would kill her in an instant, if it so suited his purpose. And the time they had spent together, learning and growing, would hold no bearing on his decision. Sickened by the thought, Fable found herself in a position to admire and loathe the fallen Jedi.

Fable slowly pushed through the door of the theater. It was early and Jaalib was not there as she had expected. Emotionally spent and demoralized, she nearly collapsed right there at the threshold, desperate for the young actor's support after yet another dismal day of training. As she stepped from the rain, Brandl was right behind her with another scathing assault. "The Force is your enemy! Turn your back on it and it will destroy you! It is your lover! Lust for it! Spurn it and it will devour you in fire. But go to it, as a child to its

mother, make yourself humble before the omnipotence of its existence and it will guide you beyond the shallow confines of this mortal world!"

Alarmed by the commotion, Jaalib hurried into the antechamber, placing himself between Fable and his father. Bordering on obvious hysteria, she stumbled into his arms, dampening his shoulder with well-deserved tears. Putting the blanket over Fable's trembling shoulders, Jaalib gently sent her off to her room: "Your bath is waiting," he whispered quietly. "I'll be there in a moment."

Waiting for the girl's shadow to dissipate in the adjoining darkness, Brandl hissed, "She's impossible!"

"Odd," Jaalib chuckled, handing his father a steaming cup of broth, "she said the same about you."

"She is so charged with emotion and sentiment!" he growled, allowing his emotions to show through the aloof veneer. "It's as if your mother never-" his voice broke off abruptly, "as if your mother never left us."

"She didn't leave us," Jaalib replied matter-of-factly. "She died, defending me from stormtroopers. Stormtroopers and Jedi hunters who came looking for you." He sniffed at the absurdity of his mother's devotion to the man that had abandoned them, only to return eight years later, bringing the darkness of his life with him. "When they didn't find you, they found a way to justify the cost of their visit by obliterating the village."

"Courtesy costs little, Edjian-Prince, and discourtesy can rob even the richest man of his fortune."

Feigning anger, Jaalib drew away from his father, recognizing the famous line. "Courtesy?" he declared impishly. "Then no more call me Edjian-Prince. Dress me in rags and let me be a poor, rude man."

Brandl's face brightened with the spontaneous performance. "You've been practicing! Excellent! You're finding the right voice for the part. Come," he whispered eagerly, pulling Jaalib against him, "we should use this moment to complete the final act." Together, they vanished into the shadows of an adjoining corridor.

* * *

Relaxed and warm beneath the downy comforters, Fable resisted the notion of rising. She laid very still, waiting for the inevitable knock on the door. "Come in."

"You're awake?" Jaalib remarked, peering inside.

"I'm usually awake," she chuckled. "I just pretend to be asleep so you'll feel sorry for me."

"Why would you want me to feel sorry for you?"

"Come on," she rolled her eyes. "Your father is the most difficult man I've ever known, Jaalib." Sitting up on her elbows, she teased, "Look what I've been going through and then tell me you don't feel some sympathy."

"Consider yourself fortunate. He was a lot worse, believe me."

"Worse?" she scoffed. "What do you mean?"

"In the last five years, he had to be a father, a mother," Jaalib sighed sadly, "as well as a mentor. It changed him."

"I knew I would have to work hard," Fable said, "but I was certain that all the work would be keeping him from luring me to the dark side."

"Has he tried?"

"I don't think so. Every time I feel it coming on, he stops me and tells me to make the right choice. My choice." She yawned, throwing the comforter to the side. "I'd better go."

"My father's not here," Jaalib said. "He's going to be away for a few days; so there's no training, unless you do it on your own." He forced himself to face her openly, allowing himself only the solace of the shadows about them to conceal his apprehension. "I was hoping you might go on a picnic with me. To make up for my behavior."

"Your behavior?"

"You remember, when you first arrived." He laughed softly. "I all but attacked you. It was inexcusable."

"And perfectly justified. You were protecting the person who is most important to you. I would have done nothing less." Patting the side of the bed, she beckoned him to sit down beside her. "My mother was a Jedi. She trained my father and then watched him die at the hands of a rival. After that, we spent most of our time running from the Emperor." Fable shook her head sadly. "I was only a baby, but I remember it well. Living with a Jedi," she paused thoughtfully, "you learn to hide your emotions, especially the hurtful ones. My mother never knew how I felt." Fable sighed as the strain of those emotions returned. "Then one day, I picked up a lightsaber and let go!" She giggled. "I don't know who was more surprised, my mother or me. That's when I began my training, whether I liked it or not." Fable shrugged away the arduous memories. "Now about that picnic, I'm starving."

"We'll have to hike, I'm afraid. The Empire didn't leave much behind in the way of transportation. Not even a bantha. Do you mind?"

"It'll be relaxing. Come on."

The Khoehng Heights were located nearly five kilometers outside the perimeter of the Kovit Settlement. Long overgrown by wild wheat, the trail leading into the mountain pass had narrowed, no longer marked with the footsteps of the farmers who once tended them. It was a rare, clear morning. Storm clouds loomed in the distance, held back by a persistent wave of warm breezes blowing through the lowlands. From the Heights, Fable scanned the panoramic view of the countryside. She could see the winding trail that led into the base of the lower mountains. The footpath climbed to give her inquisitive eyes the full benefit of the view.

Fable sighed with immeasurable pleasure, her stomach full of warm sweet cakes and honeysticks. She endured Jaalib's gentle caress at her cheek, as he playfully wiped the excess sweet powder from her face. "I've been in space too long," she whispered, taking a deep breath. "It's so beautiful here."

"After they left," Jaalib whispered, "we were cut off. No supplies, no medicinal goods, nothing. There was plenty of food ready for harvesting, but there was no one left to do it."

Fable hummed a melancholy tune. Shivering in the mountain air, she turned to Jaalib and held his gaze as he draped his cloak over her shoulders. "Why do they call this place the Khoehng Heights. Is that Old Corellian?"

"There's an outdoor theater built into the side this mountain," he replied, indicating a slight, stony ridge. "This place is named for the first play that ever performed there nearly 500 years ago."

"Five hundred years ago?" she gasped.

"Uhl Eharl Khoehng. Khoehng is Old Corellian for king. The eharl comes from Socorran mythology." He shrugged uncertainly. "It means elf or trickster."

Reminded of her Socorran companion, Deke, Fable felt a pang of remorse for leaving him. Her thoughts were abruptly diverted by a clap of thunder overhead. The skies released a deluge of cold rain. Frantically gathering the blankets and remaining baskets of food, Fable held onto to Jaalib's hand as they sprinted over the ridge. Their voices and laughter reverberated against the hollowed side of the mountain, as they slid down the precarious face of the moss-covered bank and into the shadowy protection of the antiquated theater.

An overhanging eave of solid rock covered the main stage and the first few rows of the audience pit. Cobwebbed and damp, the ancient structure stood in a silent tribute to its creators. Ragged tapestries hung from the rock walls, covered with mold, grime, and clay from the decaying structure. A few prop swords and robes were arranged on the inner panels of the stage and a multitude of candles and pedestals stood to either side of the audience pit, centuries-old relics left behind by a more playful, tolerant age.

"I used to come here as a boy," Jaalib confessed. Extending his arms to either side, he declared, "Now this was true theater, by candlelight, in an age which understood and coveted its artisans."

"Uhl Eharl Khoehng," Fable whispered dubiously. "What's it about?"

"It opens on a distant world, in a kingdom built in the center of a dark forest. After many years of ruling this kingdom, the good, wise king dies, and his handsome son," Jaalib winked, "the Edjian-Prince, takes the throne."

"I thought you said this was a tragedy."

"It is a tragedy," Jaalib scolded, "and that becomes apparent when the Edjian-Prince decides to expand the kingdom and begins sending expeditions into the forest to mark trees for felling. The men he sent never returned." He narrowed his eyes, moving his face very close to hers. "And that is when the older folk began whispering about Uhl Eharl Khoehng."

"Stop it!" Fable hissed, batting his hands away as he tried to frighten her.

"The Edjian-Prince was intrigued. He began sending daily messengers into the forest, carrying his invitation to the Eharl Khoehng to dine with him in the palace. None returned. When there were no more messengers, he sent small armies, keeping only the best and strongest warriors to guard the kingdom. They did not return. When the townspeople demanded a halt to this dangerous ambition, the Edjian-Prince ordered his remaining army to drive them all into the forest. None, not even the soldiers, were heard from again." Lighting two candles, he moved the pedestals into the center of the stage. "Only the Edjian-Prince and his faithful old hunt servant remained."

"He sent the old man?" Slapping Jaalib's thigh, Fable hissed, "This is a terrible story! What happened to the Edjian-Prince after the old man left?"

"When his servant did not return, the Edjian-Prince barricaded himself in the palace. Without his armies or his subjects, there was nothing to stop the Eharl Khoehng from attacking. One quiet night," Jaalib whispered, "the Eharl Khoehng did come, invading the Edjian-Prince's dreams. He promised safe passage through the forest. Eager to make peace, the Edjian-Prince went into the wood, where he remained for nearly a decade."

"What!"

"The Eharl Khoehng tricked him. While he did have safe passage through the forest, food, clothing, and shelter, the Eharl Khoehng held him prisoner, using illusions to trap him in the labyrinth of the forest." Jaalib blew out one of the candles. "Ten years of guilt took its toll. The prince thought he heard the

voices of his subjects crying out to him. Then one day, he was startled by the spirit of his beloved huntsman. The old man reported that the Eharl Khoehng had turned the townspeople into trees and left them there in the woods, conscious, but unable to move or speak, except when the wind blew through their branches."

"And then?"

"And then," Jaalib whispered, "unaffected by the Eharl Khoehng's illusions, the huntsman led his master on a journey to the outer edge of the forest, where the Eharl Khoehng was waiting for them." A malevolent shadow fell over his face as Jaalib stepped into the center of the stage, posing beside the lit candle. "'Worship me and call me master and all that I have shall be yours, including your kingdom,' the Eharl Khoehng said."

"And what did the Edjian-Prince do?"

"He went mad," Jaalib began in the narrative voice. "He ran back into the wood and set fire to it. By the time he was finished, there was nothing left, not one tree. 'This is the only kingdom I deserve to rule,' he declared, 'and the only kingdom that the Eharl Khoehng can claim.' " Taking one of the blackened tapestries from the wall, he threw the thick material over his left shoulder and continued the narration. "Dressed in the rags of his former life, hands and face blackened with soot, the Edjian-Prince went before the Eharl Khoehng, falling to his knees in homage. In his loudest, most humble voice, he cried, 'Long... live... the king.' "

Visibly moved, Fable applauded, shaking her head with wonderment. "Your father played that part?"

"The Edjian-Prince was my father's greatest role," Jaalib said absently. "No one has been able to bring the same dignity to the role." He sat down on the edge of the stage. "And when the time is right, we'll produce it again and I will be the Edjian-Prince and he shall be my nemesis, Uhl Eharl Khoehng himself."

Fable chewed anxiously at her lower lip. "Jaalib, why didn't you become a Jedi?"

"All I ever wanted to be was an actor," he remarked, swinging his legs against the stage. "And that's exactly what I've become. I've learned the lightsaber and other meditations of the Jedi, mostly to appease my troubled sense of loyalty. Beyond these, my father seems reluctant to teach me anymore. And I'm reluctant to ask."

Staring the rows of candles, Fable was reminded of the wax cylinder exercise. "The lightsaber exercise, the one using the ball bearings? Can you do it with candles?"

Jaalib shrugged. "That's how he taught me. I never used the wax cylinders until much later."

"Can you show me your secret? Your execution is almost flawless, elegant and equally effective."

Assembling the pedestals in the familiar circle, Jaalib motioned for her to step inside the exaggerated diameter. "May I?" he teased, gently embracing her from behind. He placed his hands on top of hers and ignited the lightsaber. The elongated shaft pulsed with magnificence and power, throwing light across the stage and the first few benches in the pit. Fable stiffened for a moment, feeling his body so intimately against her. But as he guided her through a slow rotation with the lightsaber, she relaxed and concentrated on his directives. "What do you see?" he whispered.

Staring down the line of unlit candles, Fable's eyes traced the straight, angular path. "No," Jaalib whispered, reading the expression of her body. "This is why you're having such a hard time."

"You've been watching me?" she hissed, elbowing him in the ribs.

Jaalib laughed softly. "You're trying to think in linear terms; spatial dimensions. It's not like flying a starship. You can train your eyes, which you've done quite well; but sooner or later, he'll catch you." Moving her gently to the side, he added, "You may let your eyes dictate where the lines begin, but let the Force guide you. It's not like clearing a room and then moving on to the next. There is no sequence, except the one you create as you move along. There are always several paths, right to left, top to bottom, any combination."

He removed the lightsaber from her hands and began the cadence. His movements were slow and deliberate so that she could follow him; but even these motions were faster than her most frenzied attempts to complete the exercise. As the lightsaber swept over the tops of the candles, the small wicks exploded with flame; but the wax tips remained unscarred by the weapon. Quickly moving around the circle to blow out the flames, Jaalib handed the lightsaber back to her. "Now you try."

Fable swallowed doubtfully, wondering how she would follow such a flawless performance. Igniting the lightsaber, her eyes traced the several lines of candles as they extended out in every direction. She arced swiftly through the circle, feeling the confidence of her former self return. Ten, fifteen, eighteen. As she reached the last movements of the cadence, she lost control, pitching forward as she spun frantically on her heels.

"Easy," Jaalib crooned, catching her in his arms. "You were doing wonderfully until you lost your concentration." Blowing out the candles, he said, "Try again. And this time, remember, the Force is a waterfall. Nothing can stop or turn it off. Nothing can divert the flow." Scolding her with a stern finger, he added, "Doubt and uncertainty form barriers, but only if you let them."

"Now you're starting to sound like your father."

In response, he bowed ceremoniously, then motioned toward the candles. This time, as she moved through the circle, Fable allowed the rain to guide and open her to the Force. The steady beat of the drops against the stone benches steadied her concentration and she completed the cadence without incident.

She disengaged the lightsaber, trembling slightly as she turned from the center of the circle. The Force was flowing through her, still channeling her conscious mind. Jaalib was behind her and Fable could feel his heart racing above the gentle vibrations of the Force. Before her nerve could fail, Fable turned and kissed him passionately.

"Shall we try it again?" he whispered.

"Rogue!"

Jaalib grinned, winking mischievously. "The cadence, I mean." His grin deepened as he stepped into the circle and began to blow out the candles.

* * *

The Force was with her and Fable felt it, flowing through her mind and body. She imaged the power channeling through her arms and hands and grasped the lightsaber from her belt. Visualizing the path in her mind, she moved through a series of precise parries and feints, disintegrating the first several balls with faultless execution. As she began the second half of the cadence, Brandl whispered, "Execute each motion as though it were your last. Someday, your life may depend on it. Or the lives of others."

For nearly two hours, Fable worked through the first cadence and was moving onto the second. Obviously fatigued, she began making poor judgment errors and scorched the tops of the last ten cylinders, slicing through the last one at the conclusion. She stepped back into the ready stance, gasping for breath.

"As you progress, you will learn the limits of your abilities," Brandl stated. "You are excused for the remainder of the day."

Bowing respectfully, Fable pulled her jacket from a nearby branch and started on the trail back to the theater. Jaalib was waiting for her with a sweet cake and the promise of a bath and a kiss. "How did it go?"

"I made it to the second cadence!" she whispered with excitement. "And Jaalib, I think I saw him smile."

"Now that is good news."

Glancing over her shoulder, she winked at him. "I think I'll go to bed early tonight, as a reward. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Father and I are working on the last act of the play." He smiled pleasantly, betraying his affection. "See you in the morning."

* * *

Fable awoke to a terrible sense of foreboding. Quickly dressing, she sat tentatively at the edge of the bed, hugging her knees against her chest as she scanned the shadows. Something was terribly wrong and she could feel it. Cradling the lightsaber in her lap, she took a deep breath, assured that she was ready for the worst, whatever that may be, whenever it might come.

The familiar knock came at her door. "Come in," she replied, eager to share her concerns with Jaalib. But as the door opened, she was greeted by the foreboding shadow of her mentor. "Where's Jaalib?"

"Jaalib is the one and only treasure left to my miserable existence," Brandl snarled. "I forbid this to happen. I forbid it!"

"Where is he? I want to talk to him!"

Advancing into the room, Brandl cornered her. "The theater on Iscera will be opening in a few days. I sent him there to make preparations for our production. By the time he returns, you will be gone.

Fable followed Brandl into the corridor with heavy, angry strides, allowing her emotions to seethe within her. On the verge of a temper tantrum, she braced herself as common sense called on her to reason. She had come to Trulalis to improve herself, to get an edge on the enemy who pursued her, and then to return, if possible, to her friends in the Rebel Alliance. Falling in love had no place in that design.

Brandl set a bowl of steaming broth at the end of the table and sat down on the opposite end. Fable slammed herself into the stool, barely able to curb her temper. "So what's it like to be a pawn for the Emperor!"

"I brought pleasure to my master through the tears of his subjects." Momentarily distracted by the sincerity of the spontaneous soliloquy, Brandl stared into his bowl. Recovering his cynicism, he glared across the small table. "The Emperor's ideas are quite noble: It's his methods which eventually offend those of lesser vision."

"Sounds like you're still loyal to him." Through narrowed eyes, she retaliated, "Why not, he only tried to kill you."

"In time, you will learn that an old friend is very much like a good mirror. The longer you stare into it, the harder it is to find the flaws."

A shrill whine echoed from high above, sending a peculiar reverberation through the theater. Fable felt a chill as her ears recognized the distinct sounds of a shuttle flying overhead. Its exhaust boosters could be heard above the whine of the ion drive, as the pilot circled, looking for an appropriate place to land. "That's Vialco. Isn't it?"

Brandl closed his eyes and was silent. Fable straightened her shoulders as she rose from the table, turning her back on the Jedi. "No more bad dreams," she whispered with firm resolve and stepped from the shadows of the theater into the dawn. Her body knew every hollow and rise in the unmarked trail that led to the picturesque grounds of Kovit's graveyard. She stared across the entrance mound to where Vialco stood among the tarnished graves and markers. For a moment, the fear and horror of their first encounter returned in full force.

"You've matured much faster than I expected," Vialco declared. "I never imagined Lord Brandl to be such a gracious host."

Vialco walked among the raised tombs, brushing his gloved hands over the rough-hewn stone, as if drawing power from the shadows lurking at the site of each grave. His face was gangly and angular, unattractive, with gaunt cheeks and unusually large brows. Sensing her peripheral thoughts, he whispered, "No, no more bad dreams, girl. I've come for the harvest." A sinister determination shadowed his pallid face. "What shall it be, hmm?"

Fable shifted her weight to one foot, cocking her hip arrogantly. As Vialco ignited his lightsaber, she calmly drew her own, assuming the ready stance. She parried his first, preemptive attempts to break through her defenses, losing no ground to him, and met his surprise with a coy smile.

"We are much improved," he commented. "Have I left too much time for you to prepare?" "Lord Brandl did say you were a coward," Fable taunted. "But I already knew that."

Vialco's face flushed with rage as he began a series of short lunges, forcing Fable to move back along the perimeter of the muddy basin. Feinting to the left, she swung around behind him, delivering a swift kick to Vialco's

behind. Enraged by her insolence, Vialco turned on her, gripping the lightsaber tightly in his hands. Deliberately stretching her defenses, he attempted to penetrate her confidence.

"Fable?"

Fable heard the soft-spoken voice from the past; and without turning toward the shadowy image on the edge of her peripheral vision, she knew the illusion to be Arecelis. The image waved and laughed, sounding intimately like her dead friend. "No," Fable whispered, "no, I don't think so, Vialco. I saw what you did to him. I saw it!" she seethed. The tip of her lightsaber sliced easily through the shoulder of his cloak. "And that was your first mistake."

"And my second?"

"Letting me live to remember it!" She lunged savagely at him, knocking Vialco against the tomb of Brandl's wife. Breaking off the assault, she somersaulted back down into the depression. Disengaging her lightsaber, she stood there defiantly. "Shall I play with you like you played with him?"

"Wretched girl!" Vialco hissed, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth. "If you will not be turned, you will die!" Summoning the corrupt powers of the dark side, Vialco felt the energy coursing through him. He extended his arms, curling his fingertips as the first tendrils of lightning surged from his hands.

Fable flinched, awkwardly balanced as she tried to back away. The arc of lightning shot through her, ripping into her flesh. Screaming in pain, she dropped to the ground, curling into a fetal ball as the agony washed through her. Before she could collect herself, a second and third blow left her tortured body temporarily paralyzed.

"Have we come so far to fall so low?" Vialco taunted. "Tsk, tsk, what a pity," he smacked his thin lips.

Reeling with the corrupt power surge, Fable jumped to her feet. As Vialco took aim, she somersaulted, voicing a shrill squeal of effort as the pulse of electricity cuffed her shoulder. Wielding the lightsaber in both hands, she began the subtle movements of the first cadence. As each tendril of lightning arced at her, she swept the blade of the lightsaber across it, effectively

deflecting it. She imagined that each arc was a new series of lines. Each point was the metal reflection of a ball bearing, the shiny wick of a candle.

Twenty, thirty... she lost count of the number of successful deflections. Even as the crescent of lightning arced behind her, slipping in above her head, she simply brought the lightsaber over her shoulder into its path. Never turning to look, her body reacted as her eyes designed the next path.

Fable fought her way to the top of the mound. Knocking Vialco from his feet, she pushed him down into the depression. She watched in horror as the tendrils of lightning rebelled against their master, burning through his clothing and flesh. He lurched for his lightsaber and fumbled, knocking the weapon out of reach. "Have we come so far to lie so low?" Fable mocked. She slid down the face of the mound, raising her lightsaber to finish him.

Vialco cowered below her, writhing in the mud. Something in his groveling manner made Fable hesitate, dropping her arms to chest height, as the lightsaber hummed insistently in her hands.

"Will you give him the chance to betray you again?" Keeping her eyes on Vialco, Fable felt the dark presence of her master. "Kill him and be done with it," Brandl whispered. "Only then will you know that the nightmare is over."

Fable disengaged the lightsaber and turned to her Jedi mentor. "It is over. Why kill him?"

"Remember what he is and what he has done. He will betray your dreams, as he has done before, and use them to his advantage. End the nightmare, Fable. Kill him."

Fable heard the pulse of the lightsaber before she saw it. Wondering how Vialco had gotten hold of his weapon without her sensing it, she whirled, igniting her lightsaber. Vialco arced his blade toward her vulnerable legs. In a wild strike, she severed his head from the shoulders, never losing momentum. But as he fell, she clearly saw his empty hands. The lightsaber was still on the ground, several meters from his body.

"Who's tricking who?" Fable hissed, enraged by Brandl's careful deceit. Lunging toward her mentor, she met the abrupt thrust of his lightsaber. Dominating and powerful, he knocked Fable off of her feet and drove her back

into the opposite mound. "You lied to me!" she gasped, weakly rubbing her bruised cheek. "What have you done?"

"I have set your place at the Emperor's table," Brandl replied. "Soon, I shall again stand at my master's side and you shall stand beside me." He glared down at her, mocking the injury in her eyes. "You knew there would be a price."

"What price?"

Brandl smiled, posing arrogantly for his small audience. Offering his hand, he whispered, "Worship me and call me master and all that I have shall be yours, including Jaalib's affections. There's no use fighting it, Fable. Accept and you will be well cared for, this I promise, you." Brandl turned to leave. "Don't bother running to your ship. Thermal detonators are rather effective tools." Gently caressing the scars at his temple, he chuckled, "I should know."

Locked in her room, Fable rocked quietly from side to side, wiping tears on her sleeve. Her fingers were blood-covered and black with grime, the nails shredded from a recent tantrum at the site of her X-wing. In an attempt to avoid her impending fate, she had fled to the vessel and found the gutted remains of her starfighter in a blackened blast diameter. Only the central frame of the X-wing had survived the initial blast. Vialco's shuttle was also consumed by the explosion, strewn across a sunken depression of scorched earth. Cursing Brandl, she rocked faster and harder, desperate to find some way to escape him.

The door opened slowly, a small crack that grew larger as the hunched figure skulked into the room. Fable's eyes brightened immediately, recognizing the face. "Jaalib," she whispered, swept into his arms. "Your father's-"

"Shh, I know," he hushed. Sitting down on the bed beside her, he gently pulled her trembling body against him. "I just happened to go over my ship's back-up logs and discovered my father's side trip to Byss."

"Byss?"

"The Emperor's pleasure world. I hurried back as soon as I could and found what was left of your X-wing. Wasn't hard to figure out the next scene." He picked up a small satchel of her things and threw it over his shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

"You're leaving," he replied curtly. "Don't talk. Don't think. Don't even breathe heavy or he'll find us."

"He'll know eventually, as soon as we step outside this theater."

"And that doesn't give us much time," he argued. "So just run."

Following the trail out of the settlement, Jaalib jogged toward the mountain range, using the jutting lip of the Khoehng Heights as a guide beneath the moonlit skies of Trulalis. Fable matched his earnest strides and together they ran the short kilometer to the wheat field, where a familiar ship was waiting for them.

"The Prodigal!" she screamed. "Deke!"

"Heard you got yourself in a spot of trouble," the Socorran grumbled with relief. "Didn't think I'd let you go down alone, did you?" Hearing a proximity alarm from within the ship, Deke nodded to Jaalib. "I set the sensors just like you said." He eyed his ship dubiously. "Something or somebody just tripped the perimeter sensor."

"It's him," Fable trembled, casting her gaze to the far off theater steeple.

"Then you had better go," Jaalib whispered.

"What about you?" Fable protested. "Come with us."

"He's my father, Fable. It's not that easy."

"And you call this easy?" she croaked, tears in her voice. Seeing the denial in his eyes, Fable pleaded, "Jaalib-"

Cutting off her objections with a kiss, Jaalib gently crowded her toward the ship. "For once in your life, listen and go before he gets here."

"But-"

"No, Fable!" Jaalib hissed. "You're nothing but a consolation prize to the Emperor!"

"He's right, capt'n," Deke insisted. "Time to bail."

Desperately appealing to her defiant eyes, Jaalib grinned, anxious to subdue her temper. "I was born to play this role, remember? I am the Edjian-Prince." Swallowing his sorrow, he embraced her warmly. "It's the last act, Fable. I have to burn the forest down now."

"Then burn it," she sobbed, cradling her head against his shoulder.

"I can't. Not while you're still here."

Fable stumbled up the ramp and cued the hatch controls. Leaning heavily on the secured door, she wiped absently at a tear, sensing the warmth of Jaalib's touch on her cheek.

Shielding his eyes from the freighter's exhaust, Jaalib stepped back into the swaying fields of wheat. Engines glowing red with the strain of sudden acceleration, the Prodigal banked sharply against the foot of the mountains, carrying Fable away. Lightning signaled her departure, bringing on a deluge of cold, cold rain. Jaalib took a deep breath, bracing himself for the wrath of the brooding presence slowly moving up behind him.

Brandl briefly glanced up, searching for some signs of Fable - - his squandered prize. There were none and his austere gaze fell heavily on Jaalib. "Arrogant, deceitful child," he snarled.

Feeling the subtle constriction of his throat, Jaalib resisted panic as his wind pipe contracted, seized by invisible fingers. "No less arrogant than my father," he rasped. Desperate for air, he dropped to his knees, slowly losing consciousness as the grip tightened about his throat. His father abruptly released him and the cool, damp air flowed into his body.

Staring after the retreating figure of his father, Jaalib staggered precariously. Compelled to follow, he screamed, "Long... live... the king!"

Enemies For Life

The Gorgon lay in wait, hiding in the shadow of Tinn VI-B. The moon's orbit carried it just outside the gas giant's magnetic field, making it the perfect surveillance position. They had evaded him in their last encounter ... it was only his genius in astrogation that allowed him to predict their emergence point from hyperspace. They were running like scared animals, looking only to their rear for signs of pursuit. They wouldn't see the gas giant until they were ensnared in its devastating field.

He superimposed the Gorgon's crystal gravfield trap analysis onto his holographic heads-up display and waited. Twenty seconds later, the display indicated a sharp gravometric emission halfway into Tinn VI's magnetic field. Magnifying the spectrum transceivers, he watched the hologram shift to show a carbon-scored freighter spiral out of hyperspace. The vessel was clearly out of control. Theoretically, they might not regain guidance in time to avoid the gas giant. But he knew better. The pilot was clever, if not overflowing with bravado.

The freighter wobbled, righted itself, then lost all indications of power emissions. He smiled — the Tinn VI gas giant had claimed another victim. Their ship's magnetic bottle had failed, leaving them two options: shut main power down or explode like a small nova. Wisely, they had chosen the former. He watched the crippled vessel abruptly engage emergency power, slowly rotate into position, then limp toward the populated Echnos moon.

He could swoop in for the kill now. But the contract hadn't been officially declared yet, and he wanted the money more than he wanted the revenge. It was only through non-official channels that he learned of his prey's extraordinary value. Yes. Wait eight hours. Let them be entranced by the wealth and pleasures of the city dome. Then let panic seize their throats and paralyze their minds before he struck. In eight hours.

And then the hunt would begin.

The Prophecy

The Empire has been making progress with some of the more remote elements of the traitorous Rebel fleet. Operation Venom has seen success against the so-called Pegasus Strike Force. Imperial casualties are reported to be low, while insurgent deaths and acquisitions have increased. Admiral Bethrogg of the Imperial Star Destroyer Behemoth assures the local governors that "...the revolutionary influence is being eliminated systematically and with characteristic Imperial military precision. This 'alliance' of disloyal beings has been disbanded and no further activity is anticipated in this system."

— Recent update on Channel 72NA HoloNews

A Bitter Winter

In the unrelenting glare of Tatooine's twin suns, the Dune Sea appeared to be ablaze. Featureless interruptions of hardened loam and a massive expanse of desert swells created an infinite canopy of thermal combs. A low-lying wind blew across the dune crests, persistently pushing grit and sand into the Steadfast's docking boots.

On the advent of evening, the temperature pressed the indicator scales beyond maximum, stifling an anxious Drake Paulsen as he paced in the shadow of his Ghtroc light freighter, the Steadfast. Agitated, he snatched at the sleeves of his flight jacket and threw it up the ramp into the corridor. It was little comfort against the hot winds. The young Socorran brushed his hands through a shaggy brown mane of loose curls, subsequently fingering the golden earring at his left lobe.

Blowing in from the deep desert, the direction of the wind shifted abruptly. Like most of Tatooine, this particular place had no name, no merit, only a set of coordinates which had reached him through the trusted mouths of fellow smugglers. Get to Tatooine; a friend of your father's is in trouble. Precise coordinates and vector planes had followed. Conveying an urgency that went beyond its cryptic meaning, the information had been in Socorran,

meticulously rehearsed by those ignorant of the language. Responding to that call, Drake had traveled half-way across the galaxy, arriving only moments before the prescribed hour.

A mournful wail echoed softly from the interior corridor of the Steadfast. Hands on his hips, Drake turned to the shadowed outline of his partner, the Wookiee Nikaede. Mentally translating words and phrases, he shrugged pensively, noting the curved outline of the bowcaster clasped in her hands. "You'll never pinpoint anything with that storm coming in," he growled, his voice unintentionally harsh.

Beyond the dimming horizon, a wall of sand and dust had created a massive opaque cloud that was moving in their direction. Keenly, Drake could hear the winds, a distant rumble that reverberated against the low-lying back of the ridge. "Just keep your eyes open," he grumbled and resumed his pacing.

Within an hour, the storm's forefront had arrived, blowing sand and stinging debris. Prepared to face the brunt of the storm, Drake donned his flight goggles. "Nikaede!" he shouted from the ramp. "Seal up the thrusters! This might get ugly."

Reminded of the ash storms that plagued his birth world, Drake stared into the storm, dissecting Tatooine and replacing each image with a vision of his homeworld, Socorro. These abrupt thoughts of home struck a nerve, stirring a terrible sense of misplacement and emptiness within him. Distracted, the young pirate did not notice the approach of danger until the sound of footsteps echoed above the wind. Startled, Drake turned, drawing his blaster in one fluid motion. "That'll be far enough!" he growled in Basic, recognizing the tattered robes and breath filter of a Tusken Raider. Cloaked in the violence of the wind, the desert scavenger paused briefly, regarding the pirate with cool arrogance before resuming his menacing advance.

"Move on!" Drake barked, as the intruder took another step closer, forcing him another step back. "I'm warning you," he hissed. His back met an abrupt resistance, the body of a second Tusken Raider. "Nikaede!" he shrieked, as other shadows began to move along the perimeter of his ship. Elbowing the desert scavenger, he bolted toward the ramp.

The raider stumbled back, doubled over, shedding rags and bits of cloth from its head. "Drake," its muffled voice cried. "It's me! Tait Ransom!"

Despite the raging dust cloud, Drake could not mistake the wild, black mane of hair that emerged from the disguise, nor the earthy brown face framed within it. "It is you!"

Roaring vehemently, Nikaede sprinted across the lowered ramp, cradling her modified bowcaster. She growled fiercely, moving protectively to her captain, who was surrounded by strangers. "Relax, Nik," Drake chuckled. "Look who it is."

"Still keeping the same company, I see," the smuggler grumbled, massaging a bruised rib. "Look, Drake," he said curtly, "there isn't much time. I'm glad to see you got my message."

"You sent that distress call?"

"Not for myself," Tait replied. Pursing his thick lips, he whistled sharply, a wavering note that transcended the wind. In answer, several figures scurried across the sand, through the darkness, and toward the ship. They carried a limp, unmoving body between them as they approached. Struggling weakly, the human's face was bloated and flushed with fever, heavily scarred and mutilated.

"Toob!" Drake cried in horror. He recognized the hideous scars, knowing them to be nearly two years older than they appeared. One eye was missing, the socket smoothed over with a discolored patch of scaled skin. The other eye was not human, but rather a cybernetic implant that flashed intermittently, as if malfunctioning.

"It's a bitter winter when a smuggler reaches the end of his days," Tait whispered sadly. He stepped to the side of the ramp, ushering his men onto the freighter.

"What happened?" The Wookiee snarled with menace - - Drake silenced her with a stern glare. "Show them to my quarters!"

As the Socorran turned on him for answers, Ransom waved a dismissive hand before his face. "Forget the details, Drake, I don't really know them. I don't know what's wrong with him or how he got that way." Bending at the waist, he shook the sand from his breath filter, tapping it lightly against his heel. In an odd dialect, he motioned his people away from the Steadfast.

"Well what do you know?" Drake griped.

"He's dying," Tait whispered arrogantly. "And he'd be dead by now if I hadn't stuck my nose in it." He watched the Socorran carefully for a reaction. "Jabba

has a quirk about people dying in his palace. A useless death is a senseless death. If it isn't entertaining or at least profitable, then it's bad luck. And Jabba hates bad luck." Shrugging, Tait started back into the storm. "He ordered us to dump him in the desert. Fortunately, I had a spice shipment to deliver and it gave me enough time to get the word out."

"But why?" Drake demanded. "Toob has never failed Jabba!"

"It's got nothing to do with failure, Drake." Recognizing the Socorran's temper, Tait hissed, "Don't get any fancy ideas, kid! This isn't Socorro and we're not talking about Abdi-Badawzi." He snatched Drake by the collar, pleased by the frightened glaze that clouded the boy's eyes. "This is the real league out here. Your daddy isn't here to pick up the pieces if you mess up." Releasing the Socorran, he whispered, "You're better off on the other side of the galaxy." Ransom donned his mask and breath filter. "Wait until the storm passes before you leave the planet." As silently as he had come, he vanished into the sandstorm.

Sprinting up the ramp, Drake initialized the closing sequence. A sudden gust of wind shook the Steadfast, rattling through the ventilation ducts and open cylinders. "Nikaede, anchor the landing struts and lock down every vent!" His voice echoed down the passage, muffled by the howling windstorm outside. "Make sure the drive coil shields are in place!"

Exiting the captain's quarters, the Wookiee roared her acknowledgement, pausing only briefly to stare at her partner and then into the cabin. A mournful wail escaped her toothy mouth.

"Don't worry," Drake whispered. "I'll see to him myself. Just get those vents closed and make sure the hyperdrive is functional. We might need to use it in a hurry." As the Wookiee retreated, the Socorran hesitated in the doorway of his personal quarters. Reluctantly, he stepped inside, forcing a long, shuddering breath into his lungs. Kneeling beside the built-in bunk frame, he stared at the withered figure beneath the blankets and watched as the old man shivered and moaned deliriously. Retrieving the medical kit and an antiseptic towel from inside, he gently dabbed at Toob's feverish forehead, frowning as the dirt and grit rubbed off onto the cloth, leaving behind the mutilated, sunburned flesh of the Corellian's face. "Toob?" he whispered.

Fluttering, the eye opened, its edges swollen and red with fever, Seated in the loosened socket of flesh, the cybernetic unit whirred noisily, focusing on the young pirate. Briefly, a thin smile parted Toob's blistered lips. "Drake," he mumbled hoarsely. "Is that really you, boy?"

"Who else?" Drake whispered. As he had so often done as a child, he took the smuggler's hand and pressed the palm against his forehead. Fighting back tears, he recalled the strength of that hand only 10 years ago and how it had once been able to cradle and protect him. Drake stared, unflinching, into the Corellian's ruined face, remembering how a traumatic encounter with a homemade thermal detonator had left seven men dead and two survivors, one missing a leg, the other his eyes. All the results of one bounty hunter's failed attempt at fame. A smooth, yellowed patch of calloused skin covered what should have been the left eye and socket. Shortly after losing the right eye to radiation, it was replaced with the cybernetic optic.

Flushed with cold sweat, Toob stammered, "I... I knew that rascal... Tait Ransom... would find you," he croaked. Seized with a violent spasm of pain, the Corellian cringed, coughing. Moaning miserably, he relaxed against the pillows, temporarily trapped between unconsciousness and waking.

"Easy," Drake crooned. "You're safe now. Save your strength." His words fell on deaf ears as he gathered the covers beneath the old man's neck. "Nik!" he hollered into the internal comm. "Raise my cabin temperature by 10 degrees. "

Drained and demoralized by the fall of a childhood hero, Drake held onto Toob's hand, resting his forehead against the cold, unyielding flesh, as if anchoring the Corellian to the material world. Inundated by a flood of childhood images, he grinned, recalling the bawdy words of a smugglers' bar song, one that Toob had often used in place of a lullaby. Remembering the warmth and power of the man's embrace and the hoarse chorus of words, he began to sing. "I've been on both sides of a blaster. I'm known by the enemies I keep. I'm punching up a jump to disaster. Sweet lady," he yawned mightily, "sweet lady, kiss me, kiss me please." Drifting, he mumbled, "I've run... the Kessel... and survived... " As the stupor of exhaustion stole over him, he quietly fell asleep.

* * *

"I've run the Kessel and survived the show! Made the billboards in Mos Eisley; but I'm no hero, just a lonely rogue. Sweet lady, do you have something special for me?"

Startled by the blustering chorus, Drake awoke. Disoriented, he tumbled from the bunk, cocooned inside the blankets. As he raised his head to the fading shadows, he soundly bashed his forehead against the bed frame. Invoking several Socorran curses, he massaged the raised bruise and sat up in a

clutter of blankets and pillows. Mentally retracing his steps, he recalled the desperate message that had carried to him to the distant world of Tatooine and his maddened attempt to break the rules of hyperspace to arrive at the prescribed coordinates at the appointed time.

Several hours had passed, according to his indicator, and the muddled Socorran could not remember giving the order to leave. Abruptly, his mind conjured the unsettling images of Toob's bloated, gray face and the jumbled voice of Tait Ransom and the coming sandstorm. Stumbling through the door, he scrambled into the corridor as the raucous chorus echoed from the aft section of the ship.

"Won't vanish in no Imperial Census! No, I won't work the Emperor's mines! Ain't scared to make that Final Jump alone, as long as I bid all my mates clear skies!" A melodic verse of Wookiee broke in between the refrain. "That a girl, Nikaede! Now, I'll go and get Drake," Toob grunted. "You head up to the cockpit and set a course for Redcap."

"Redcap?" Drake mouthed, listening to the hiss of deck plates sliding into place. Moving into the accessway, he spied Nikaede opening up the last of the drive coil shields. Toob was nearby, watching her. "Why Redcap?"

"Drake!" Toob cried earnestly. His face was still flushed with fever, his voice scratchy, inflamed with infection. "What's the matter, boy? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Drake leaned against the bulkhead. "I'm not so sure I haven't."

Grinning playfully, Toob limped over to him, palming the young Socorran's forehead with his hand. "Can a ghost do this?" he teased. He turned to the Wookiee, "Set a course for Redcap. With everything she's got!"

Nikaede hesitated. Though she liked the old man and had grown to trust him, even in the absence of her captain, she was reluctant to overstep the bounds of loyalty.

Drake grinned, his faith in friendship renewed. "Go on, Nik. Redcap."

"You have yourself a fine first mate there, Drake. Finest mechanic I've seen this side of the Outer Rim."

Not to be distracted from his question, Drake whispered, "What's on Redcap, Toob? And don't tell me it's a rubber ball conversation and that it will bounce right over my head. This is my ship," he stated matter-of-factly. "If you're up to your neck in bantha fodder, I want to know how and why."

"Fair enough," Toob conceded. For a moment, Drake could see through the thick scars and scaling skin to the old Toob, brown-eyed, flushed, and always grinning with mischief. "It's the biggest spice shipment you or any smuggler has ever seen. Enough spice to make me a king! Why, with my share, I could buy this dustball and turn it into a retirement home. And I tell you what Drake, I'm gonna make sure Marji cuts you in on the deal."

"Marji?"

"Saylor Marjan, a friend of mine from the old days." Abruptly his face darkened, showing the strain of illness and worry. "Speaking of those days, I have something for you." Pulling the chain and metallic tags from his vest pocket, Toob handed the military IDs to Drake. "These were your pop's," the Corellian whispered. "Heard he made his fortune some years back and I thought you might want to have them."

Drake took the chain, quietly staring into the metallic etchings of his father's name, rank, and unit. "A colonel?" he scoffed. "He was one of the Black Bha'lir? Is this real?"

"Does it feel real, boy?" Toob scolded. There was a sharpness to his voice. "Your daddy could out-fly a TIE fighter with one hand on the throttle and the other on a bottle of Corellian whiskey. Called him the Socorran Scourge-" The smuggler's eye dimmed without warning. He collapsed to his knees, leaning heavily against the corridor wall.

"I gotcha," Drake gasped, holding the slumped form against his body.

"What happened?" Toob grumbled.

"I think you better lie down until we get to Redcap." Helping Toob back to his quarters, he fended off the smuggler's coming protest by adding, "You can tell me all about the Black Bha'lir and how my father ended up being a colonel."

"Well, what you'll hear is authentic," Toob insisted. "On my bloodstripes, it's a true story."

* * *

Twelve kilometers behind and below the narrow mountain ravine, the sprawling mouth of Tyma Canyon began to vanish beneath a wandering blanket of lavender-pink clouds, a peculiar phenomena unique to the sullen gray skies of Redcap. The infamous chasm sloped and divided for several hundred kilometers, crisscrossing the barren, flushed face of the planet's

surface, forming the only possible landing ledges within a 20-kilometer range of the mountain settlements above the rim.

Leaving the Steadfast safely hidden in the basin region, Drake bartered a bottle of Socorran raava and a few power cells in exchange for a pair of olai. Left behind in the wake of dwindling mineral resources and mine closures, the creatures were late descendants of those that had worked in the mines. Aggressive yet enduring, the animals had spent nearly a decade evolving within Redcap's hostile environment, multiplying and spreading over the planet's surface.

Drake watched the olai's ponderous head, bobbing left to right with each stride. The bulbous, hollow horns that grew and curled about the creature's head and neck gave the impression that the animal was struggling to carry its own bulk. Exhausted and moody, the mare threw her head in protest, spraying her chest and legs with foam. Noisily rasping her teeth over the metal bit, she clenched and hauled at the reins, hurling herself and her rider over the final ridge.

Loosened in a fall farther down the mountain, a broken mountain cleat clattered noisily against the iron-mounted shoe. Drake listened to the dim rattle, reliving the near fatal spill. He shook his head dubiously, wishing that he had never accepted Toob's impetuous challenge to race up the mountain. Chastising himself, Drake realized that in Toob's shadow, he was still a little boy and the smuggler had used that to his advantage.

Still shaken by the crash, Drake pressed a confident heel to the mare's side and urged her to gallop into the narrow ravine. Slumped over in the saddle, Toob's feverish face glistened with sweat and the smuggler grumbled unintelligibly. Drake gently pulled the reins from the Corellian's loose hands and attached a lead rope to the olai's bridle.

Annoyed by the old man's beguiling force over him, Drake planted a firm kick to the olai's side, ignoring a streak of red clay across his flight goggles. His eyes followed an unerring path of vague childhood memories - - obscure recollections that beckoned with the promise of help and security in the good will of an old friend. If his instincts were accurate, he would find sanctuary in the small hunting lodge, which sat only meters from the main trail, nestled in the crook of the Juteau Settlement gates.

Beyond the rustic rooftop and the modest corral, Drake could see the veiled outline of houses, shelters, and shops. Along the main road, several glow lamps had been activated, chasing away all but the most persistent shadows. From the dim, night skies, a light drizzle fell, lending an unnatural thickness to the footing. The click of the olai's metal claw echoed noisily against the rutted trail, as he swung into the front yards. And despite the unmistakable sharpness of the mountain cleats, the animals stumbled frequently.

Drake guided the mare to the corral fence and halted. Stiff and saddlesore, he kicked free of the stirrups and dismounted. With deliberate slowness, he gently swept his hands over the olai's broad back, surveying the extent of damage covering her black hide. Severely bruised by the fall, the mare flinched beneath his touch, nickering polite criticism to her handler. Vividly made aware of his own sores, emotional and physical, Drake grinned and scratched her velvet-smooth muzzle.

"Well, if it isn't the Prince of Socorro himself," a dim shadow whispered. "And one of the fallen crowns of Corellia."

Drake snorted, recognizing the familiar accent of another childhood hero. "Ol'val, Fahs," he greeted, accepting the Issori's steady handshake.

Far from his aquatic homeworld, Issor, Fahs' white-blond mane had grown dingy gray from time and ill-health. He wore it proudly in a ceremonial tailknot, hiding the pale, balding spot at the crown of his head. The cost of vanity exposed the smooth, rounded sides of his face, where evolution had removed primordial ears. Dressed in faded, beige pirate leggings, his skin and hair showed a lifetime ordeal spent in the vermilion clay base of Redcap. Deeply tanned and prominent with muscle, the Issori's long, slender limbs accentuated his elongated frame, lending a visible strength to the seemingly fragile stature. In the shadows, Drake noticed a slight tremor in the lean, webbed fingers, evidence of too much time spent in the local cantina, rather than in useful pursuits.

Fahs smiled generously - a genuine warmth spread through the measure of his wrinkled but charming face. "Still not a man, but living a man's life. You look well for a common rogue, Drake Paulsen."

"That's because I'm not so common," the Socorran quipped. Inclining his head toward Toob, he whispered, "Do you have a place for us?"

"Always." Moving to the olai's side, the Issori gently cradled Toob against him and slid the unconscious smuggler from the saddle and onto his shoulder.

"There, there, old man," he whispered against the Corellian's incoherent muttering.

Drake followed him to the lodge door, hesitating in the narrow frame. Acclimated to the darkness, he scanned the familiar interior, where he had spent numerous summers in the company of his father's most trusted friends. Reluctant to go any farther, he retreated to the shadows outside and to the olai, who were in need of some attention.

Nearly an hour passed before Fahs re-emerged from the lodge. "How long's he been like this?"

"Ever since we left Tatooine and before that I'm not sure." Drake leaned against the fence post, resting his forehead on the rutted wood. "Jabba ordered Tait to dump him somewhere in the desert. Something about bad luck if Toob died in the palace."

Fahs laughed. "Jabba is as Jabba does; and no one ever accused him of being compassionate."

"Someone ought to teach that slug-"

"Someone ought to leave it alone," Fahs scolded gently. "You've got much potential, Drake. Get a few more light years under your belt and in time, you may yet give the old worm his due."

"I could care less about Jabba. Right now, Toob's my biggest problem. What's going on, Fahs? What's wrong with him?" Exasperated, Drake tossed a stone over the olai pens, into the brambles on the opposite side. "It's like he's slowly going insane."

"You might say that," Fahs replied, gathering his thoughts. "On my world, the poets call it melanncho, a sadness so far reaching that it drives men mad. Our cousin species, the Odenji, were nearly destroyed by it some centuries back." The Issori shifted, glancing at the night sky. "When I began working on Corellia, the miners," he sniffed with conceit, "who knew nothing of the arts, called it by another name... brekken vinthern."

"A broken... a bitter winter?" Drake translated.

"It's a bitter winter when a smuggler reaches the end of his days. That's where the saying comes from. They call it that because few ever survive it." Crossing his arms over his chest, Fahs yawned. "Back then, it was common to miners who worked the radiated core operations or smugglers who spent too much time working with contaminated engine parts."

"So what happens to him?"

"Well, Drake," Fahs pensively began, "men taken with it don't usually die in their sleep. I once saw a pirate who had it suffer 40 or more stab wounds before dropping out of the fight."

"Who was he fighting?"

"Himself. He thought the Empire had impregnated him with thousands of tiny transponder beacons. So he started cutting them out."

Drake swallowed with effort, struggling with the realization, "Isn't there something... anything we can do?"

"There is one thing." Fahs pursed his thin lips and stared into the thick clay beneath his feet. A stern, distant expression enshrouded his face, which was no longer handsome, but rather sinister in the shadows. "He's in the final stages of the disease. In the last few hours, he may not even know you. May turn on you in a bad way. He'll relive the past, mistaking it for the present, and he may even mistake you for an old foe."

"And when it happens," Drake probed. "What am I to do?"

The Issori never hesitated. Leaning into Drake's face, he replied, "Make certain it's your finger on the trigger and not a stranger's." Fahs moved away, taking refuge in the shadows. "There's only two kinds of sacrifice in this life: those one willingly offers and those meant to be suffered. Sometimes, it's hard to tell the difference."

"How do you tell?"

"We take care of our own, Drake. When the time comes, you'll know."

Numb, Drake trembled, avoiding the Issori's steady gaze. Staring out beyond the darkness of the olai pens, he watched a shadow move along the perimeter of the corral. The figure paused, watching them for a long moment before waving. "Who's that?"

"Lieutenant Noble Calder," Fahs whispered. "He flies escort for the Aremin. They're searching the area for smugglers." Winking playfully, he snorted, "Do you think he's found any?" The Issori pulled Drake close to him, massaging the boy's taut shoulders. "Calder's a good man for an Imperial, Drake. Don't judge him by what you see."

"Eventide, Fahs," a smooth voice greeted. "How goes the night?"

"It goes well," Fahs replied, accepting the Imperial's hand and imparting a firm shake. "Lieutenant Calder, this is a dear friend of mine. Drake."

"Drake," Calder welcomed, offering his hand in earnest friendship.

Drake waited for his smuggler's sense to erupt with suspicion and alarm. As his eyes registered the black flight suit, an unexpected wave of calm coursed through him, pacifying his pounding heart. "I'm really not such a bad guy," he

heard the Imperial chuckle. "It's all in the uniform." Drake laughed, shaking hands with the officer.

Oddly at ease, he smiled into the handsome face and the shock of white hair crowning it. Deeply inset blue eyes were separated by an unusually angular nose, offsetting the cruelty of an aristocratic countenance.

Gently cuffing Drake's shoulder, Calder teased. "What are you doing with this old scoundrel? You're just a kid."

"He's 17," the Issori said curtly. "That's a man in our world."

Straightening, Calder whispered, "Don't smugglers believe in childhood, Fahs?"

The reply was unexpectedly sharp. "One tends to grow up fast on this edge of the Empire."

"All depends on the choices you make." Winking, he patted Drake on the head. "Good night." He started back to the mountain road, retreating through the settlement gates and into the commons.

Guardedly, Drake whispered, "Speaking of smugglers. Do you know a Saylor Marjan?"

"Know the name," Fahs replied. "Haven't seen the man in over a decade or more. I met him on Arapia when Toob and I went to collect on a debt for a crimelord named Saadoon-Kauldi."

"Saadoon-Kauldi," Drake laughed skeptically.

"You'd be surprised who we worked for back then, my young friend. Anyway, it just so happens that Marjan was the one who owed the money. Being friends, Toob let the fool talk him into running a load of spice through the Elrood sector to help him pay off the debt and maybe turn a profit." Pursing his lips, Fahs grinned with the memory. "We made it. Got the money for Saadoon. But what we made as profit couldn't pay enough to fix one, let alone five hull breaches we sustained." The Issori shook his head wearily. "Marjan was a fool. But who was the bigger fool, Toob or him, I can't honestly say.

"Toob mentioned him and something about a large spice shipment. That's why he insisted on coming to Redcap."

"It's the disease. Don't worry yourself, Drake. Saylor and Toob were friends, long ago. They had a falling out almost 20 years ago and haven't spoken to each other since." Guiding Drake by the shoulders, Fahs led the exhausted

Socorran to the lodge door. "I think you could use a sip of my soup, my old mother's recipe," he chuckled. "Just right for a cold, damp day."

"Sounds good," Drake replied sleepily. Quietly, they stepped inside the cabin and closed the door, barring it behind them.

* * *

Drake awoke from a troubled slumber. The heat blasting from the hearth was stifling, almost alive with a tangible essence. Unable to breathe, the Socorran quickly donned his boots and fled the lodge, escaping into the swarthy night mists. Climbing the corral fence, he stared into the great mouth of Tyma Canyon, mesmerized by the intricate labyrinth of semi-underground ravines and hidden mountain passes, each highlighted by ivory marble shading and open, black voids, exposed beneath the dim light of the stars.

The stillness of the night erupted with the distant shriek of a landspeeder engine, reverberating from the cliffs and projecting echoes farther down the mountain. As the vehicle approached, Drake jumped down from the fence, taking cover behind the water trough. He watched as the speeder's headlamps pierced the darkness, lurching unsteadily from side to side as the craft swerved, narrowly missing the settlement gates before righting itself on the trail.

The Rodian driver shrieked as a bottle of daranu slipped from his grasp and shattered against the steering bar. Desperate to save the last few drops, the Rodian braked sharply, nearly launching himself and his passengers from the vehicle. Beside him in the front canopy, a Sullustan hooted several seething curses as his forehead connected with the dash leaving a noticeable dent in the storage compartment.

From the back seat, two human men howled with delight. "Don't get the wind up your tail, Nio!" one of them bellowed in Basic. "Here," he threw another bottle to the elated Rodian, "have another. There's plenty where that came from!" Saylor Marjan swayed precariously before sitting back into his seat. Momentarily, he barked, "I can't believe you brought a kid in on this thing, Toob. What were you thinking?"

"You let me worry about the boy," a hoarse voice replied. "I'd take him over any one of you jet juicers." The smuggler gagged as a fit of coughing assailed him.

"As long as he can fly escort in my Z-95," Marjan recanted. "I'll cut him in on a fair share."

"That's all I ask," Toob wheezed. "Now let's get going." Abruptly, the Rodian gunned the engine and the landspeeder veered, sideswiping the mountain wall and rattling its passengers. Marjan swore vehemently, batting the driver over the head with a meaty fist. Grumbling obscenities, he snatched the bottle from the Rodian's trembling hands and shattered it over his scaly head. "Now do it right!" he snarled. Weaving, but steady, the landspeeder resumed its course, accelerating down the mountain road to the canyon trails below the rim.

Frantic, Drake sprinted across the small compound, hurdling a workbench of abandoned engine parts. Sliding to a halt as Fahs emerged from the doorway, he sputtered, "Did you-"

"I heard," Fahs gushed, handing the Socorran his blaster, shirt, and coat.

"How could he even get out of bed!" Drake asked, shrugging on his shirt.

"It's the nature of the disease," Fahs replied, anxiously staring down the trail. "Up, down, totally unpredictable, particularly in the last stages."

"Where do you think they're headed?"

"The Laughing Bantha, probably."

Buckling his blaster around his waist, Drake stumbled toward the olai pens. "I'll take Garish Ridge and head them off."

"Rains washed it out," Fahs warned, leading one of the olai behind him. "It's certain suicide, even on an olai." As Drake settled into the saddle, the anxious Issori whispered, "Watch yourself."

Drake flashed a reassuring smile, charming the Issori's fears and his own. "I'll take care of him." Activating the beacon light on the mare's harness, he whistled encouragingly and spurred her onto the trail, galloping recklessly into the narrow mouth of the canyon passages beyond the settlement.

"I know you will, boy," Fahs sighed, exhausted. He watched the beacon light dim over the ridge trail. "I know you will."

* * *

Barely an hour out of the rim, Drake leaned over the mare's neck and slapped the reins against her lathered shoulders. He could see the Laughing Bantha just below him and could hear the characteristic shriek of blaster bolts coming from that direction. He reined the mare off the trail and into the rocky slopes above the tavern. Disengaging the light apparatus, he slowly worked his

way down the hazardous slope, desperately scanning the shadows and the arc of laser fire from each side of the establishment.

On the left, he could make out the white-on-black armor of Imperial stormtroopers as blaster shots briefly illuminated the area behind the bar. Opposite them, he saw the smoldering remains of a Rodian and a Sullustan sprawled in the mud. The Sullustan was still alive, its arm badly wounded and dragging at his side as he crawled toward his companions, who were pinned down behind the landspeeder. A stray shot effectively ended his struggles.

"You're on your own this time. Marji!" a voice bellowed. "Ain't up to me to fix this one!"

Recognizing the harsh quality of Toob's voice, Drake guided the mare in that direction. From his vantage point, he could see that the stormtroopers were preparing to charge the outnumbered, outgunned smugglers. Using suppressive fire to their advantage, they delayed the attack as another detachment of stormtroopers moved into position on the outer flank.

Drake galloped out of the high ground, making a bold sprint across the field of fire as dozens of Imperial soldiers took aim. Lashing the mare beneath him, he dodged a frenzy of blaster salvos by spurring the temperamental olai up and over the disabled landspeeder. Fiercely checking her with the reins, Drake spun her about, balancing over her cumbersome neck as she reared. "Come on, Toob!" he shouted, momentarily making eye contact with Marjan.

Pale with hysteria, Marjan screeched, "You can't leave me, Toob!"

Pulling himself up by the stirrup, Toob hissed, "Curse your luck, Marji!" Savagely, he struck the smuggler in the head with his boot, smearing red clay over his face.

Drake clicked his tongue against his teeth. The olai responded strongly, rearing slightly before galloping away from the muddle of shouting voices and blaster fire. Protesting the extra bulk, the mare bucked with serious intentions of throwing her riders. Irritably bouncing her hindquarters every few strides, she threw her head and kicked up her heels, stumbling in the unstable clay. Drake snatched the reins, guiding her back onto the road. It was a desperate struggle as the mare fought back, unable to compensate for the shifting weight and the reckless flight down the mountain. Lengthening her stride, she obeyed, galloping down the steep canyon slope, twisting her ankles and knees with every step.

Drake kept his heel at the mare's side, insistently spurring her. Behind them, he could hear the fading sounds of pursuit. Every few strides, the noise of stormtroopers trapped up to their knees in clay would lessen. The Socorran grinned wryly, praising a night full of torrential rainstorms that had precipitated and allowed their escape.

Making one last effort to resist, the olai mare violently threw her head. The blow connected with Drake's nose with the snap of bone. The Socorran fought to keep the mare's head under control, effectively keeping her on her feet. Behind him, Toob shifted to the side, nearly staggering from the olai's back as the mare hastily jumped an outcrop of rock. Squealing in terror, she landed in a quagmire of wet clay, desperately thrashing her hind legs to escape the bog. Despite her efforts, the mare staggered and collapsed to her knees. Sparks flew from her cleated shoes as she thrashed against the jagged rocks, which were scattered along the trail. Somersaulting into the air, she threw both riders before landing again with a bone-shattering impact against the hardened mountain road.

Controlling his fall, Drake tucked and rolled. Trapped by momentum, he continued to plummet, head over heels, down the mountain pass. In the confusion of nausea and vertigo, he heard the mare's wretched cries behind him, as she crashed down the rugged slope and into the canyon basin. Accelerating down the incline in a maddening tangle of legs and reins, the olai bounced over and above him, striking him in the side with a flailing hoof. At the base of the mountain, he slammed into her, knocking his head against her unmoving body. His last sight was that of the late night sky, violet, pink, and then endless black.

* * *

Frightened by unknown injuries, Drake winced, making no attempts to move. Testing each limb, he was satisfied that there was no permanent damage and struggled to sit up.

"Drake?"

"Toob!" he gasped, recoiling as the sound of his own voice exploded within his skull.

"Who taught you how to ride, boy?"

"You did," Drake grumbled. "Remember, you bought me a dewback from Tatooine."

The Corellian chuckled with the memory. "Well aren't you a sight." He helped the boy to his feet. "Nothing broken?"

"No," Drake pouted, then curtly, he demanded, "Do you mind telling me what that was all about?"

"Gunfight," Toob huffed, pulling the saddle bags from the olai's body.

"A gunfight? With Imperial troops?"

"Well, I didn't start it!" the smuggler defended, grinning mischievously. "But I did intend to finish it. What the... whoa!" Abruptly, the olai stirred, violently lurching to her feet. Broken in the fall, her front legs collapsed under her at a peculiar angle and she fell, sprawling to the clay floor. Blood trickled from her mouth and ears, as a mixture of fluids seeped from her nose. Blowing and grunting in agony, she again struggled to her feet, succeeding by standing on her hind legs. Desperate and exhausted, she flopped back down to the ground and roared unsteadily. Whinnying pitifully, she stared at her human handlers, pleading for support. "There now, old girl," Toob crooned softly. "Drake?"

Through a dark tangle of brown bangs, Drake stared past the mare into the shadows beyond her. Hesitating, he thumbed the restraint from his blaster and cocked the pistol against its holster. "Go on, Drake, don't let her suffer," he heard Toob's soft voice against the wind. Taking strength from the familiar handle, he drew the blaster and fired, killing the mare instantly. Twitching briefly, her contorted limbs ceased their struggles - - she was still.

Turning his back on the corpse, Toob rasped, "Might want to call your Wookiee partner and let her know we're coming."

"Can't," Drake replied in a meek voice. "Comlink's busted. Remember that fall up the mountain?"

Toob's ruined face mustered a look of confusion. "We did?"

"You don't remember?"

Shrugging it off, Toob started down the trail. "Doesn't matter now. Let's get back to the ship. I think we both could use a good stiff drink right now."

Troubled, Drake fell in behind the smuggler, following the starlit trail. "You know, Toob," he began gingerly, "being retired and all, you might want to consider slowing down. Maybe find yourself a few decent friends."

Without turning to look, Toob grumbled, "What? Just because I have one good eye and a few extra pounds, I have to take up farming?"

"Well no, but you have to admit, that little stunt up the mountain could have been fatal."

"You're starting to sound like my brother - - careful, calculating... dull."

"It wouldn't hurt for you to take a few lessons." Drake hesitated, then he added, "If you had listened to him, you would never have gone to that warehouse on Ottega."

Toob halted abruptly, growling, "Karl went because he wanted to! No one asked him to go!"

"What was he supposed to do, Toob?" Drake probed. "He's your brother. Someone had to watch your back."

"Is that what he told you?"

"That's what happened, Toob, and everybody knows it."

In grim silence, they walked the last few kilometers down into the rutted canyon gorge, following the trail to the landmark Ruck's Rut, a geographic phenomena of multi-level rifts and fissures which could hide and shelter any number of light freighters and small spacecraft. Moored on a sturdy ledge, only meters from the earthen clay floor, the Steadfast's support struts showed the vermilion taint of the soil base, evidence of her stay on the dismal red planet.

Nikaede loped across the ramp, her voice booming from the interior corridor, reverberating in the close quarters. Drake grinned. There was no mistaking a traditional Wookiee homecoming. Bracing himself, he did not resist and felt himself being lifted several centimeters from the ground in the Wookiee's powerful arms. Exhausted, he simply relaxed in the torrential splash of black and silver fur. Setting her captain back on the ground, Nikaede bellowed mournfully, eyeing the bruises and nicks all over his face. The smell of blood was pervasive and she whined for an explanation.

"Later," Drake whispered, glancing past her. Without comment, Toob walked by them and into the ship. Briefly, the Corellian reappeared, swinging a bandoleer of power packs over his shoulder. "Toob?" Drake trotted after him, gently taking the smuggler by the sleeve. "What are you doing?"

Toob snatched his arm free. "I'm going to finish what someone else started." He resumed his walk toward the mountain trail, grumbling irritably to himself. Tapping his foot impatiently against the rock floor, he paused at the edge of the ridge. "Come on, boy! I'm ready to go!"

"Go?" Drake gasped, trembling.

Jamming his blaster into its holster, the Corellian growled, "It'll be just like me and your pop, when we shot it out with sector cops on Bnach."

"Toob," Drake swallowed, "Bnach is an Imperial prison planet. No one goes there-"

"Well maybe it was the Manda spaceport on a... on a," he paused, flustered by the muddled memories. "Never mind. Doesn't matter. I'm not gonna stand around while good men like Ziv Banks, Lu Esi, and Tenke Hurn are gunned down in cold blood."

"Toob, those people are dead. You told me stories about them and what finally happened to them, remember? Ziv died in a shootout at the Orange Lady on Nar Shaddaa. Lu crashed his freighter over Vedis IV, running from sector authorities. And Tenke, he was with you when that detonator exploded on Ottega. He didn't make it out."

Toob began to pace unsteadily, obviously disoriented. "Some, the finest smugglers this side of Corellia... who needs them!" he griped. "We can take that Imperial bunker ourselves!"

"Toob!" Drake pressed. "There is no Imperial bunker!"

"You've gone yellow, Marji! Curse your luck!" Toob snatched his blaster free of the holster. Set for a fatal burst, he aimed at Drake's chest. "Yellow! But you've always been that way, haven't you?"

Waving his first mate out of the way, Drake pleaded, "Look at me, Toob. I'm not Marjan."

The Corellian's face darkened as a wave of confusion overwhelmed his troubled senses. Faltering, he lowered the blaster. "Kaine? Kaine, my boy! What are we waiting for? Let's go blast a few plastic soldiers. For old time's sake!"

Remembering the Issori's warnings, Drake cautiously replied, "Toob, please. Kaine was my father. He's dead now, remember?" A profound sense of pity swept through the young pirate as he tried to bring the smuggler back to the present reality.

"Dead?" Toob mumbled incoherently, struggling with the concept. "Then... then who are you? Some punk kid!" he screeched, again raising the blaster to chest level. "You heard about me and you come to see if the old man still had the juice, eh! Thought you could earn a little blood money and make a name for yourself by taking out old Toob Anchor. Well not in this lifetime, boy!"

Agilely dodging the first blast, Drake grasped Toob's arm and ducked beneath it as the second bolt went wild, narrowly missing Nikaede, who dropped to the ground for cover. Drake tried to shake the blaster from his grip; but the hold broke. Before he could sidestep the unbalanced Corellian, he felt the abrupt heel of the blaster strike him across the chin. Reeling, he fell to the ground, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

"Nikaede! Stay put!" Drake screamed over the Wookiee. Stumbling to his feet, Drake raised his arms in surrender.

"Who are you?" Toob whispered, fury abruptly diminished. "Wipe that blood off your face and let me see you."

Drake rubbed the blood from his mouth. "Toob, it's me," he whispered, failing to hide the injury in his voice. "Drake, remember?"

"Drake?" Toob cried. "What are you doing?" Bewildered, he stared at the blaster in his hand and the swelling at Drake's chin. "What have I... done?"

"Nothing," Drake whispered. "Nothing happened."

"Nothing?" Toob gasped. Turning away from the Socorran youth, he stared into the darkness beyond the ridge. Incensed by the thought of betrayal, he threw the blaster against the rocks. "Never should have left Tatooine. Should've... should've put a blaster to my head and..." Exasperated, he rasped, "Go on, Drake."

Make certain it's your finger on the trigger... not a stranger's. Drake inched, remembering the Issori's advice. "Toob?" he croaked uncertainly

"Go on to bed, boy," Toob replied reprovably. "We'll talk again in the morning."

Against better judgment, Drake surrendered to the little boy inside him, the awestruck child who admired and adored the brash Corellian. Disoriented and obedient, he retreated to the ship. "Come on, Nik." Badly shaken, he strained to shove the infuriated Wookiee onto the ship, pulling fur and skin to coerce her up the ramp. Rubbing a trembling hand over his bloated face, Toob cursed himself. Remembering the words from an old smugglers' ballad, he softly sang, "Who fears the bitter breath of winter? A man who's never known the cold. Sweet lady, there is nothing colder," he paused, massaging his troubled brow, "than the heart of a smuggling man grown old."

Experiencing the dying Corellian's sense of loss and desolation, Drake accompanied him, silently whispering the chorus. "Night falls and I am far from my home. Caught between my cradle and my grave. Caught between the cradle and the grave."

* * *

As Nikaede's gentle hands shook him, Drake stirred. "What?" he mumbled, groggy and stiff from his adventures. The Wookiee barked softly, pushing the comlink to his lips. "Who?"

"Drake!"

Recognizing Fahs, but not the panic in his voice, Drake snapped, "Toob! Not again! Where-"

"Never mind searching for him. He's not even on the planet." Fahs paused for effect. "Somehow he managed to get hold of a Z-95 Headhunter. What's he up to, Drake?"

"Haven't a clue," Drake replied, clamoring for his boots. "He can't be too far away."

"Well hurry, the ruckus is all over the Imperial frequencies."

"We'll find him." Tossing the comlink aside, Drake sprinted up the corridor to the flight cabin. "Boost the sensor array and scan for recent ion traces," he ordered as the Wookiee settled in beside him. Agilely, his hands began throwing flight switches and toggling control modules. "I know," Drake whispered to her complaints about the old man. "Just bear with me."

The Steadfast hovered precariously above the ridge floor, deftly sliding beneath the jagged ceiling and into the open mouth of the Tyma Canyon Basin. Despite the interference of Redcap's dense stratosphere, Nikaede easily located the ionic blast trail. Examining the sensor data, she confirmed it and broadened the sensor sweep to include the surrounding space above the planet. With a forlorn groan, she made a disturbing discovery.

"You found him!" Drake cheered. "Where?" A capricious snap from the Wookiee unnerved him, as did the four unidentified blips on the sensor screen. "Punch into their frequency."

"Veerpal Squadron, where are you?" a desperate voice cried. "We are under attack! Respond immediately!"

Nervously, Drake watched the on-board flight computer flash through its library of schematics, confirming the presence of an Imperial Star Galleon and a Z-95 Headhunter. Approaching swiftly from the far side of the planet, two Imperial Assault Gunboats were closing at intense velocity to engage the intruder.

Nikaede groaned, a panicked whine reverberating in the back of her throat. Wistfully, she read off the information to her captain. "Two ion cannons, two laser cannons, and two missile launchers with eight concussion missiles a piece." It was Drake's turn to groan. Throttling the Steadfast's engines, he guided the freighter on an intercept course with the Imperial assault ships.

The Star Galleon had the look of manufacturing newness, its hull glowing ivory-white in the dim hollow of space. The vessel had never seen true combat time - - this much was obvious from the incompetent handling of its

turbolasers. Galleon and crew relied heavily on its predatory escort now arriving from the planet. From the blast scoring across the galleon's once pristine armor, it was evident that the Headhunter and its pilot had done their job well with several adroitly placed concussion missiles.

As Drake approached at speed, he recognized the wide, haphazard bootlegger's turns and defensive spirals, which left the galleon's gunners effectively stymied. The maneuvers were all characteristics of Corellia, the legendary homeworld that had created men like Toob Anchor, his brother Karl, and a number of colorful figures who now lived in the shadows of galactic law. Against such a pilot, the galleon's defenses were all but useless.

Drake felt his heart sink as the gunboats swung into formation, pursuing the lone Z-95 on a straight vector. Dodging a wild shot from the frustrated gunners, Drake guided the Steadfast into the fray, deftly eluding blasts from the Imperial defenders. Increasing power to the aft shields, he left all weapons powered down. If the Imperials were monitoring him, they would see that the light freighter temporarily posed no threat.

Adjusting for the power surge in the shield generator, Nikeade brayed anxiously. The soft-spoken Wookiee disliked their close proximity to the Imperial ship. She snapped the modified heads-up display between them, showing Drake the incoming blips on the sensors array.

"I see them!" Drake grumbled, as the lead starfighter barreled toward them, accelerating. "Open the comm. I want them to hear our transmissions." Manipulating the guidance system, he slid the Steadfast into place behind the fleeing Headhunter, just as a blast from the gunboats struck his stronger shield defenses. "Toob!" Drake growled. "What are you doing!"

"Settling the score, boy!" the Corellian countered with laughter. "Point for point; life for life. Now get out of my way! You're jamming my targeting scope!" He banked sharply, following through with an extreme dive, before leveling off in an attempted course back to the galleon.

Easily mimicking the maneuver, Drake fired, "You'll have to do better than that, Toob. This is insane! Now stop-" The starfighter's maneuver jets abruptly sputtered, effectively stalling the small craft. To avoid a collision, Drake spun the controls, bringing the Steadfast up and away from harm, opening the way for the assault ships to swoop in for an initial strafing run. "Toob!" he cried in frustration.

"Unidentified freighter," crackled a voice over the comm. "We are reading you as the Steadfast. Stand down and leave the area. This is Imperial business. Your indiscretion could result in-"

"Calder?" Drake gasped.

"Well, well, well," Calder crooned. "My little friend from Redcap. Nice job back there at the Laughing Bantha."

Startled by the Imperial's cool sarcasm, Drake shared an apprehensive look with his first mate. Voluntarily, he broke from the chase, allowing the assault ships to corner him. "Look, Calder, there isn't much time."

"You're right there, kid," the Imperial huffed. "Time's run out for your friend and you too if you continue to interfere."

"He's sick!" Drake protested. "He can't be held responsible for his actions now!"

"Three dead gunners and five wounded technicians say that he can."

"Just let me talk to him."

"I have my orders, Drake." Swinging wide, Calder's assault boat broke off, leaving the remaining ship to contain the Steadfast. Faultlessly executing Imperial defense maneuvers, the pilot chased the elusive Z-95, pressuring the smuggler until finally Toob abandoned hopes of deploying any missiles and began running from a barrage of laser blasts from the gunboat's cannons.

Eluding his guard, Drake slipped beneath the craft and rocketed toward the scene, leaving the startled pilot behind him. "Calder, pull up!" he fired over the comm. "Pull up now!" He followed the Imperial's single-minded pursuit across the rim of Redcap's atmosphere and then back across space to the galleon, recognizing the trap being laid. Abruptly, Toob slowed the Z-95, cheering as the gunboat raced past him into the blaze of the galleon's mammoth engines. Heeding the warning too late, Calder pulled up, shredding one his five wings against the edge of the galleon's drive system. The assault craft spun out of control, rolling through open space before the Imperial pilot could regain command of the flight module.

Drake waited for Calder's gunboat to pirouette through his line of fire and then activated his forward firing lasers, catching Toob unaware. The bolts exploded precisely, disabling the Z-95's engines, while leaving the fighter intact. Toob fired his main lasers and launched the last of his concussion missiles, all to no avail. Without its engines, the Headhunter was dead in space, drifting at the mercy of Redcap's gravitational undertow.

Breathless, Calder guided his crippled gunboat back into the arena. "I'll give you one option, kid. The only option my orders allow." He paused. "Your trigger or mine."

"They got me, boy!" Toob cackled manically, freeing himself from the safety harness. He was so disoriented, he had not realized that the disabling shot had come from the Steadfast. "Shut me down, but not before I gave them boys a run for their money! Ha, ha!"

"Toob, listen to me."

Ignoring Drake's quivering voice, Toob shifted in the pilot's seat. "Got to make a run for it." He pulled the canopy latch. A warning siren blared nosily, signaling the imminent danger of decompression. "Toob!"

"Clamp's locked in place," the Corellian grunted, as the device failed. He hauled at the switch, sweat clouding his cybernetic eye. "Can't wait around for them to come back." Examining the blast scoring, he laughed, "They've locked me in, boy. If I can just..." he tugged at the seal, "work it... loose. I might yet slip away." Still jiggling the welded clamp, he began to sing, "I've run the Kessel and survived the show..."

"Drake?" Calder grumbled impatiently.

Make certain it's your finger on the trigger and not a stranger's. Empowered by those troubling words, Drake whispered, "Stand by." Weaving slowly down the narrow corridor to the cradle of the ship, Drake slid down the gunner's ladder. Reluctantly, he strapped himself into the turret and powered up the heavy weapon. Focused on the crippled Z-95, he could feel the burn of the computer's targeting scope acclimating with his retinas.

In a frenzied panic, Toob continued his desperate attempts to escape the canopy, despite his lack of an environment suit. Enraged by the confined area, he removed his helmet and began bashing his head against the seal, smearing the reinforced glass. Abruptly, he paused and stared from the smudged canopy, into a great expanse of configurations and colors, toward the only recognizable shape his mind could grasp, the Steadfast. "There now, old girl," Toob crooned, hearing the screams of the dying olai in his mind. "Go on, Drake," he whispered. "Don't let her suffer."

Drake squeezed the trigger. A burst of energy buffeted the disabled Z-95 and it erupted into a ball of imploding flames. The blast propelled wreckage and shrapnel over a wide area of space. Massaging the bridge of his nose, Drake closed his eyes as a tear fell across his cheek.

"Aremin, this is Lieutenant Calder confirming one hostile dispatched. Veerpal Squadron standing down." As the second assault craft sped back to the planet, the Imperial pilot lingered among the blast-scored debris. "Look, if it's any consolation to you, Drake, your friend didn't leave you much of a choice. It was your trigger or-"

"I understand," Drake interrupted. "Believe me, it was better this way." Swallowing the lump in his throat, he whispered, "Thanks."

"Clear skies, Steadfast. Calder out." The assault ship staggered across space, returning to its command station, somewhere below the atmosphere.

* * *

Despite the heavy cloud cover, a few stray beams of sunlight managed to pierce the gray, spreading warmth across the cold, barren floor of Redcap's notorious Tyma Canyon. Docked on the narrow landing strip, the Steadfast and her counterpart, a YT-1300 called the Glory, seemed oddly out of place: diminutive, insignificant inside the kilometer deep ridges and continental shelves of the great canyon.

The Glory's hull was pink, stained by her two-year retirement on the surface of the planet, hidden away in the basin where no sector authority or rival could find her. And here she had remained, while her captain traveled the galaxy in the company of friends. Still spaceworthy, the matriarchal freighter seemed to cast an aura that Drake could only define as a smuggling ship's inner pride. Every crack in her armor, every discolored shield plate, every recognizable breach to her frame held a wealth of history, symbolic medallions of her exceptional career.

Exhausted and demoralized, Drake leaned against the Glory, pressing his feverish forehead against the ship's cool hull. With childlike naiveté, he threw his will and all his conviction against the light freighter, in an effort to imbue her with the life of her captain. Any minute, if he concentrated hard enough, Toob would come strolling down the ramp and greet him with a hardy slap on the back or perhaps a bawdy chorus from a smugglers' ballad.

Beside him, Fahs lovingly caressed the freighter, realigning one of her docking boots with a swift kick. "She served him well, from the day he got her... to the day he retired her here in the valley." Pursing his lips, he ran his fingers along the ragged edges of the freighter. "You know, she once ran the Kessel in 20.5 parsecs."

Narrowing his eyes with suspicion, Drake stared at the Issori, wondering at the cruelty of this joke.

Fahs laughed with light-hearted spirit. "That's a bantha's pace today, I suppose. But back then," he shook his head as the memories flashed through his cluttered mind, "back then... she was something. The Dame of Nar Shaddaa, they used to call her. That was before the days of Tait Ransom or Elias Halbert, even that young fellow, Solo. Them boys weren't even born when this very same ship," he slapped the freighter proudly, "was entertaining underground royalty and thumbing her nose at sector authorities across the galaxy." Scratching the back of his neck, Fahs nervously hummed a somber tune. "I don't suppose you want to fly her back to Socorro. I don't have much need for a ship nowadays and... i know it would tickle Ancher to see her again."

"I'm not ready to go home, Fahs," Drake whispered, avoiding the Issori's eyes. "Not yet." He felt Nikaede's shadow fall over him and listened to her mournful wail. Leaning into the Wookiee's supportive warmth, the young Socorran ran his fingers over the Glory's hull one final time.

"I understand, Drake. Old men dream dreams and young men live them." Standing on the ramp, Fahs posed as if on stage. "Youth makes every heart a king and every adventure a crown to be captured." Distracted, he laughed at himself, sighing, as if a great weight had been lifted from him. "Never been to Socorro. Heard Toob talk about it. Guess I could go there, stopping by way of Nar Shaddaa. Wouldn't mind sharing a moment with some old friends." Squinting, he stared into the morning sky. "There was this pretty little gal who used fancy me. She tended bar at this corner tavern called the Orange Lady.. " he flashed a roguish smile. "Well," the Issori chuckled, blushing profusely, "that was another time... another adventure... long time ago." Winking, he keyed the ramp closing sequence, "Clear skies, little prince - - wear your crowns proudly."

Sheltered beneath the Steadfast, Drake and Nikaede watched as the antiquated freighter teetered precariously over the makeshift landing field, hovering unsteadily beneath Fahs's control. Relearning the subtle shifts of the flight module, the Issori settled the freighter, banking sharply over the canyon ridges and up into the clouded atmosphere above the planet.

Drake sighed, finding an inner peace imparted to him by the Issori's wit. "How fast do you think she is?" he asked, fondly glancing over the Steadfast. Nikaede shrugged, grumbling multiple quantum equations and theories. "Only one way to find out," the Socorran mused. Whistling a jovial tune from a

smugglers' ballad, he met the pragmatic Wookiee's challenging snarl with a warm smile. "Set a course for the Kessel system."

Stand And Deliver

The lights and colors of hyperspace swirled outside the cockpit of the Skyjumper. It had an almost hypnotic effect on her captain, Drev Jalok, as he stared out the viewport. His mind was occupied with what he would do with all the credits he'd get once he delivered his cargo to Altier. This was the big score he had been looking for. He would have enough to last him for a very long time, even the way he spent credits.

Suddenly, a warning siren blared, indicating the ship was about to drop out of hyperspace. Jalok quickly snapped out of his reverie. That's odd, Jalok thought. We're nowhere near the Altier system. What could have ...

With a jolt, the Skyjumper dropped into realspace. Looming dead ahead and growing by the second was a large asteroid. "Son of a gundark!" Jalok grabbed for the controls, trying to veer away from the hulking rock.

Sullub Soonin, Jalok's Sullustan co-pilot, appeared



in the doorway to the cockpit, jabbering excitedly. Suddenly, his rubbery lower lip froze as he saw the asteroid. Soonin lunged for the controls to help Jalok, but it was too late. While they managed to prevent the Skyjumper from totally slamming into the asteroid, the ship still swiped it.

Soonin looked at the damage readings and gibbered to Jalok. Jalok knew they were in trouble without the ventral gun or shields. He then checked the sensors. Six fighters. Two old Z-95 Headhunters, two Zebra starfighters and two Y-wings. And one capital ship — a Corellian corvette. "Lock and fire the dorsal gun while I try to set some new coordinates and get us out of here!" Jalok ordered.

The enemy fighters swarmed the freighter like metal insects as the corvette moved into position. Soonin scored a hit on one of the Zebras, but they were overwhelmed. The Sullustan shook his head and muttered under his breath.

The corvette opened up on the Skyjumper with its ion cannon. The instrument panel was engulfed with blue lightning, ionizing the controls.

Another hit rocked the Skyjumper. A light on the instrument panel indicated the hyperdrive motivator was damaged. Soonin groaned something about being helpless.

The comm crackled to life. "Stand and deliver!" a triumphant and familiar voice boomed. Jalok gritted his teeth and slammed his fist on the control panel.

"Drednar!"

Finder's Fee

Thella knew the Finder would be waiting for them at the back of Lorana's Labyrinth. And he just might be able to get their infiltrator team off the planet without the Empire crashing the party.

Thella took her first officer, a burly brute named Huffreys, and led him by the hand into the bar. Kelada starport's renown Labyrinth was a maze of crooked bar counter and counter-height tables arranged in a life-sized puzzle. Patrons of every species crowded their way, smoking, drinking, socializing in numerous sounds and tones. Several creatures skittered past them, no taller than their knees.

Thella reached over and checked the shoulder pocket on her flight jacket. The flap was snapped down and the data card inside secure. They had gone through a lot of trouble to get that information from the Empire... she wasn't about to let a few difficulties get in her way.

Huffreys bullied a few beings out of their way, all the while looking back skeptically at Thella as if to question her judgment in coming here. Thella knew he didn't like dealing with aliens. But at this point, the Finder was the only one who could help them.

The only three booths in the entire bar were at the end of the maze, if the labyrinth could be said to have an end, and if one could find it. At times the dive seemed to stretch on endlessly. But after a lot of jostling and pushing and almost tripping on the short skittering aliens, Thella and Huffreys found the three booths at the maze's end. And sitting in one was the Finder.

He really wasn't as omnipotent-looking as Thella had imagined. The Finder was a Twi'lek, somewhat taller than average, wrapped in a gray tunic and black hooded cloak. His hands hovered gracefully over a few datapads scattered on the table. Two of the red-scaled, short aliens peered over his shoulder from the booth's corner, eying the datapads as if they were lunch.

"I am Loh'khar, the Finder," the Twi'lek said, looking up from his datapads as if salutations were an afterthought. "You are looking for safe passage off Kelada for you and your friends?"

Thella took a step back. "How did you know?"

Loh'khar looked back at her with sly eyes. "It is my business to know such things," he said. "It is not my business to tell you how."

Oh. Thella slipped into the bench opposite the Twi'lek. Huffreys stood just outside the booth watching Loh'khar and the bar's patrons, his hand on his blaster handle.

"Is this how you anticipate your host's hospitality?" Loh'khar asked, looking down at Thella over his upturned palms. The two red-scaled aliens tittered to themselves in the corner.

Thella bit her lip, then pulled a small pouch from her service belt. She tossed it, and the pouch landed with a thud near one of Loh'khar's hands. He opened it, sniffed the contents gingerly, pulled the drawstrings and sequestered the pouch in one of the folds of his tunic.

"Kau'lehalle so fendoon," he said. "The guests are welcome. So, I hear you have run into some trouble with the Imperial constabulary.

"Let's cut to the chase," Thella said, leaning over the table. "I've got six team members to fly out of here. The Imperials locked up our transport in impound with two squads of stormtroopers as soon as they found us breaking their bank."

"To which system do you require transportation?" Loh'khar calmly asked.

"Anywhere there aren't any Imperials. Gelgalar will do. We can catch another transport there for our final destination. I need a flight jockey who can blast us past the Imperial blockade upstairs. I need a field medic, or at least an Emdee droid who can fix up my security specialist. I need a decrypt unit."

"You are certain what you retrieved from the Imperial garrison post requires a decrypt unit?" Loh'khar chided. "I would have thought the processor you stole would require an interface pad..."

"Whatever. And I need all this soon - - before the stormtroopers combing this starport find the hidey hole where the rest of my team is lying low."

"What you ask is complex," Loh'khar sighed. "But it is possible... for the proper compensation."

"Whatever I've got, you're entitled to it," Thella replied, giving Loh'khar the upturned palms sign.

Loh'khar smiled. "Rizzal," he called, turning to one of the red - scaled aliens. "Go tell Undermaster Neffron I could have some valuable information on the Imperials for him if he can give me his hard-coded interface pad. Deliver the device into my hands. And if you see Nizzal on your way out, have her report immediately." Rizzal tittered once, scurried beneath the table, and bounded out into the crowded bar, dodging the patrons at knee-height.

Loh'khar turned to the alien's companion, leaning attentively over the table. "Vizzal, go visit Fotane the droid dealer, and tell him I shall take my payment on that favor I arranged for him with starport customs - - and remind him it can be revoked. Return with that Emdee droid. Yes, the one in the back room. Escort it to docking bay KB-101." Vizzal tittered some more. "And be quick about it!" Loh'khar snapped. Vizzal was off under the table and skittering through the bar.

Another red-scaled alien, almost identical to the other two, popped its head up from beneath the table. "Ah, Nizzal, so glad you could make it, " Loh'khar said. "We have some clients here who need our help. I want you to go to docking bay KB-101. Find the Silver One. Gently remind her about that concussion missile tube I arranged to be installed on her starship, then escort her back here immediately." Nizzal nodded, a feral look in her eye as she peered at Thella, then sped off beneath the table.

"It will take them but a few moments if all goes well," Loh'khar said. "Please, let us order some drinks. Something to eat, perhaps."

Huffreys shuffled uncomfortably, watching the Twi'lek and being particularly careful not to let one of those red-scaled aliens sneak up on him. Thella watched Loh'khar as he sifted through his datapads, adding information here, checking data here, slipping a data card from one to another to transfer more notes.

An attractive Twi'lek waitress squeezed past Huffreys and set the drinks and a plate of some chandad nibbles on the table. Loh'khar absently fingered his glass, but didn't sip.

Thella began rapping her fingers on the table when one of the red - scaled aliens zipped beneath the table and popped up next to Loh'khar. It tittered at the Twi'lek, then brought up what looked like a thick datapad with several extra keys and input jacks.

"Ah, Rizzal, nice job," Loh'khar said, removing the hard-coded interface pad from the creature's hands. The alien eyed the plate of chandad. "Go ahead," Loh'khar said, "You may have two." The alien's agile arms leaped out from its clothing and snatched up two nibbles. It gobbled them down without a second thought.

"This should help you decrypt the processor you acquired from the Imperials," Loh'khar said, sliding the box across the table to Thella.

"When can you get the other things we need?" she asked.

"I assure you, they will be forthcoming very shortly." Loh'khar gracefully reached for the chandad plate and took a nibble. "As for my compensation..."

"I'm not paying out anything until everything is set," Thella said.

Another red-scaled alien popped up beside Rizzal and tittered at Loh'khar. A moment later, a woman with striking platinum blonde hair swaggered up to the booth. By her boots, vest and blaster, Thella could tell the woman was a smuggler. "You call?" the smuggler asked.

"Platt, how nice to see you," Loh'khar said, smiling a broad grin.

"These kind folks and their friends require discreet transportation to somewhere out-of-the-way. Where did you say? Gelgela?"

"Anywhere backwater," Thella said.

"I'm headed in that direction anyway," the smuggler said, eyeing Loh'khar with what Thella thought was contempt. "Is that why Vizzal brought that surgical droid over to the Last Chance?"

Loh'khar ignored her. "So, now that everything is satisfactory, we shall discuss my compensation..."

"I don't have a lot of money on me for a finder's fee..." Thella began.

"I said compensation, not payment," Loh'khar corrected her. "I have the perfect idea." He reached out gracefully toward Thella, seemingly intending to stroke her chin. Before his hand even stretched halfway across the table, Huffreys reached over from his guard post at the booth's edge and grasped the Twi'lek's wrist.

"Is this any way to treat your host?" Loh'khar asked.

"I think I know what he has in mind," Thella told Huffreys. The man released his grip on Loh'khar's wrist.

"Thank you."

"He wants this," Thella said, unsnapping the shoulder pocket to her flight jacket and removing a datacard. She glared at Loh'khar. "We went through a lot of trouble to get this..."

"All I ask is to copy it," the Twi'lek replied, reaching for a datapad with an empty data card slot. "I have certain friends who would very much like to know what the sector fleet is up to. Besides, you never know what kind of information will be useful to others."

Thella reluctantly handed Loh'khar the data card. The Twi'lek slotted the card, typed in some commands on the datapad, removed Thella's datacard and inserted one of his own.

"Thank you. It is always a pleasure doing business with the Rebel Alliance."

The Cure

"Six months ago, the planet Sedesia was hit by a devastating plague. The unknown virus spread uncontrollably through the population, infecting 90 percent of the inhabitants within the first month. Thousands died, and more were dying. During the chaos, the Empire quickly moved in and took control of the planet. They established a quarantine and set up medical facilities to combat the disease. Since then, we've had no word from Sedesia. Now the Imperial medical service claims to have ended the plague."

Hareel activates a holoprojector showing an Imperial news release about the plague. According to the tape, "the benevolent guidance of the Emperor has once again saved his subjects from harm. The Imperial medical service has ended the terrible plague on Sedesia. No new deaths from the disease have been reported in the past month. The quarantine of Sedesia will remain in effect until the Imperial medical service has determined there is no danger to the rest of the Empire."

Hareel turns off the holoprojector. "Needless to say, I'm suspicious — the Empire is seldom so benevolent. When Tallek had that outbreak of thorn fever, they just hauled all the sick off to isolation camps and let them die. Alliance Command shares my skepticism. We need someone to go to Sedesia and uncover the truth. What's really going on there? How are the Imperials coping with the plague, and how can we help the people of Sedesia?"

Pathogen-Based Loyalty Enhancement Report

From: Dr. Fesjo Negleem, Sedesia Project Director

To: COMPNOR Coalition for Improvements, Redesign Bureau

Subject: Pathogen-Based Loyalty Enhancement Program Evaluation

The Sedesia test project has succeeded admirably. Six months after the virus was introduced to the planet by covert aerial spraying, a former hotbed of Rebel activity is now completely loyal to the Emperor. The plague, a modified form of my virus FNV-23, achieved 99 percent infection in the first two weeks. Mortality rate during that period was 35,310, or 2.3 percent of those infected. The disruption of government allowed a completely bloodless occupation, conducted entirely by a single regiment of CompForce personnel. Once control of the planet was secured, a program of inoculations was instituted, using volunteers generously provided by SAGroup.

This inoculation program is the key to the entire plan of loyalty enhancement. The drug (my own antiviral agent FNA-23-B) prevents replication and breaks down the outer protein coat of FNV-23. Normally, this would be followed by a complete cure as the victim recovers from the effects of the virus. However, each injection of antiviral drug also includes tiny globules of the FNV-23 virus encased in a polysaccharide coat. The globules break down after 10 to 20 days, releasing fresh viruses into the victim's system. Thus reinfected, the victim requires a fresh dose of FNA-23-B to avoid suffering the effects of the plague.

The shifting-antigen feature of the FNV-23 virus makes it impossible for any victim to become naturally immune. And the formula for antiviral agent FNA-23-B is an Imperial secret. The result of this is obvious — the inhabitants of Sedesia are now completely dependent on us for the antiviral drug. If we choose to deny it to them, they will die. For them, loyalty to the Emperor is now a matter of survival.

The success of this project is undeniable. All known Rebel sympathizers on Sedesia have been eliminated by the simple expedient of withholding the antiviral drug. I propose we expand this program, beginning viral spraying on other worlds. The attached document includes a cost breakdown of the entire Sedesia operation. Note the dramatic savings when compared with the price of a military invasion and pacification campaign.

Balancing the Books

To: The Exalted Jabba

From: Calk Fen, Accounting

Re: Solo Delinquency

Greetings, Exalted One.

As per your request, here is the information concerning the despicable Captain Han Solo and his record of account. And believe me, you have every reason to be angry with him! Mighty Jabba, to date Solo has failed to make good on cargo lot #3207D. He ridiculously claims that he was forced to jettison the shipment due to the untimely arrival of an Imperial cruiser. When your humble servant Greedo approached the smuggler for collection of the amount owed, Solo blasted him. Continuing his heinous crimes, O Powerful One, Solo has left Tatooine, taking his Wookiee companion and the *Millennium Falcon* with him. He claims to have a charter that will allow him to pay off his debt -- and the substantial interest -- as soon as he returns. Needless to say, his scheduled return date has long since passed. I fear, Your Greatness, that the 12,400 credits he owes us -- along with the accrued interest -- is lost.

While the rest of us were uselessly lamenting over the detestable Solo's supposed victory, Great Jabba, you put us to shame with your quick thinking and purposeful plotting. Your wisdom shines like the twin suns of our desert world, Your Worshipfulness, and I bask in the light of your sneakiness. Placing a price on the smuggler's head is an inspired idea that only your great mind could devise! And employing the bounty hunter Boba Fett to find the disgraceful Solo is a stroke of genius! Fett will secure what is due -- of that there is no doubt -- in credits, ship, and blood.

Illustrious Jabba! Your memo ordering that discipline and standards be maintained in light of the current situation truly enlightened your lieutenants. If not for your brilliant and timely response, the other pilots may decide that they can dump shipments with impunity or claim Imperial entanglements whenever a run is botched. Or worse, they may take to frying your loyal agents instead of paying their debts. As you so intelligently discerned, stern measures must be taken to assure your continued profit margin. You are absolutely right

that an example must be made of Solo so that other pilots will know that such actions against the great Jabba the Hutt will not be tolerated!

The *Millennium Falcon*, on the other hand, is much too valuable to lose. It served you well in the past, before Solo became its captain, and it will serve you well in the future. With another, more cooperative pilot, its profitable history can be continued. Doubtless wise Jabba knew these things already and neglected to mention them as a test of his loyal servant's intelligence. Oh subtle Jabba!

Honored Jabba, I have included a list of what this unscrupulous smuggler has cost you, to date, through his unscrupulous actions. The amounts listed below are directly or indirectly the result of Solo's decision to dump his cargo, and his equally terrible behavior since then. With your permission, I would like to immediately list them as unrecoverable business losses.

Although it indeed pains you to destroy someone you have long considered as a son (especially before he has a chance to pay off his debts), as you say, Solo's head will serve as a fine deterrent to any other employees contemplating similar actions. As always, the decisions of Mighty Jabba are fair, just, and extremely profitable.

Your very very obedient servant,
Calk Fen

Captain Solo's Debts to Jabba the Hutt

Jettisoned spice cargo: 12,400 credits

Dead employee (Greedo): 4,100 credits

Loss of services (*Millennium Falcon*): 125,640 credits to date (based on last cycle's performance)

Bounty hunter notices: 320 credits

Boba Fett's expenses: 5,000 credits to date (based on a rate of 500 credits per day)

Additional bounty hunter fees: 2,000 credits to date (based on a rate of 50 credits per day per hunter)

50% Interest: 74,730 credits to date

Total: 224,190 credits to date

Crossing the Dark lord

A tall black knight of darkness stood alone on the command deck of the massive Star Destroyer. He had given orders that the lights be dimmed and that all command personnel leave the area for the next few hours. Lord Darth Vader often felt the need to be alone, to "touch the universe without any mortal distractions."

But the vessel's captain decided to watch from afar, using the Star Destroyer's own security cameras to monitor his de facto superior. He was nervous, but felt sure he was safe on the other side of the massive ship. Now the main viewport was on and the vessel was cruising slowly through the stars, awaiting news on the Rebel prey from Vader's many minions and spies. It did not matter where the call came from. The Dark Lord would order the ship into hyperspace on a whim, on the slightest chance of finding the Rebels who destroyed the Death Star.

A breeze rippled through his floor-length cape, and the Dark Lord of the Sith spread his arms out wide, as if he were hoping to rise up on the winds in flight. Little did he care that the "winds" actually emanated from the environmental units in the floor at his feet. Vader raised his right arm and clenched a metal fist. "I shall find Obi-Wan's companions, for that is the will of the Emperor and the dark side!"

A few more moments passed and the shudder felt earlier throughout the vessel died away. The Dark Lord's shoulders straightened and his breathing grew slow and deliberate. "Yes, soon the bright flame of the Rebellion will find itself extinguished. No one must underestimate the powers of the Force."

The captain leaned back and bite back a sarcastic laugh. "There goes Lord Siloquey again," he chuckled to himself. "Ranting to the universe about his grand plans." Suddenly Vader stirred, listening to some silent sound. His right hand rose high in the air, stretched open like a waiting claw.

The captain leaned back in his chair and watched Vader's antics with anticipation, wondering what new amusement the Dark Lord of the Sith might be about to provide him.

Slowly, Vader turned to face the captain. "Captain," said the deep voice from behind the black helmet, "I am about to afford you a rare privilege."

The captain jumped from his seat as sudden realization gripped him. Somehow, some way, Vader had heard his comments. "You are about to experience the powers

of the Force," announced the black knight confidently. The open, black-glove hand began to clench, and the captain felt the muscles of his throat collapsing.

As his victim fell to the ground, the Dark Lord's arm fell with him. He continued to gaze out into the inky blackness, this time undisturbed by any mortal companionship.

